

# Together

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Southern Ohio/Kentucky District Church of the Brethren

## Hope Rising

# Light in the Darkness



During my time as pastor at Pleasant Hill, our Christmas Eve services were a time of sharing the story of Jesus' birth through scripture readings and carols. I usually closed the service with the beginning of John's Gospel and then we would darken the sanctuary, light our individual candles from the Christ candle on the altar, and sing "Silent Night." There was nothing more peaceful and beautiful than our sanctuary filled with those candles glowing in the darkness, signifying Jesus' birth into our world.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." (John 1:1-5 NRSV)

As dark as the sanctuary was on those Christmas Eve evenings, there was a comfort and a peace that filled me with hope. No matter what was going on around me, our church, or our world, Christ, "the Light of the World," was there among us. Even if we had lit only one candle on those evenings it would have shown in the darkness.

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." There have been times in my life when the darkness of despair, doubt, and grief have severely shaken my faith; it seemed as if all hope was hanging by a thin thread. But at just the right time, a little flicker of light would appear; maybe through a phone call, a card, a visit, or an email. Then, the darkness didn't seem quite as dark anymore. These things didn't magically make the reason for the darkness disappear all at once, but they did remind me that I was not alone. The person reaching out at the time probably didn't even know how much I needed my hope restored—a light to see the way ahead.

There are so many people living in darkness nowadays, either because of situations they did not choose or because of choices they've made. We are not to judge the reasons for their darkness. However, we can be a light in their darkness. God sent Jesus to us to light our darkness and to show us how we can be a light to others. Jesus started the church, not to be a place of conflict, judgment, or division, but to be a place of light and hope for all people. As much as we have tried to snuff out that light, "the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness [has] not overcome it."

The light may seem pretty dim at the moment, but I can look around and see many different places of light in our district. This fills me with hope, which is why I signed on to be the Interim District Executive. Our challenges in the world and in our churches are not going to magically go away. But if we look to Jesus, the Light of the World, we will find a way forward.

My friends, Jesus shines in the darkness. The darkness is very real, human, and absolutely essential to reveal the light. Nevertheless, the darkness will never overcome the Light. This is a fact we must remember. This is the good news of the Gospel and the hope that inspires us to work together for the glory of God and our neighbors' good. May it be so.



*Nick Beam has served the Pleasant Hill congregation of the SO/KY district for the past 23 years beginning as interim pastor in 1998. He was licensed by the West Milton congregation in 1991 and ordained by the Pleasant Hill congregation in 2000. His ministerial preparation was completed through the Training in Ministry program of the Brethren Academy for Ministerial Leadership in 1999 and a Certificate of Achievement in Theological Studies in 2008. The Southern Ohio/Kentucky district has called Nick to various areas of service over the years including district board, Standing Committee representative for 6 years, leadership team, ministry commission, and moderator for this year's district conference. Nick has served in partnership with other pastors in the Pleasant Hill community in administering the Newton Food Pantry and sharing in ecumenical worship services. He and his wife, Annette, are the parents of 2 boys, Nathan and Noah and 3 grandchildren, Jaiden, Sam, and EmmyLou.*



## Lifelong Habits of Hopefulness

by Todd Reish

It seems easy to over-dramatize what our society has been through in the last two years. The world has not faced such enormous numbers of seriously ill people since the 1918 flu pandemic, not to mention the growing number of pandemic-related deaths. According to the World Health Organization, there were nearly 5.5 million deaths attributed to COVID-19 as of the end of 2021. So maybe it is NOT easy to over-dramatize what we have gone through in the past 24 months. In these very difficult and trying times we may ask ourselves: Where do we find hope in the midst of a catastrophic, worldwide virus? But beyond that question we also ask: Where have we found hope throughout our life?

As chaplain at the Brethren Retirement Community I recently asked these questions to a number of residents during a Bible Study. These questions opened up a much larger and meaningful conversation concerning hope. The following are a couple of questions and responses:

### *Where do you find hope during the pandemic?*

- Cleaning the house (keeping busy).
- Jigsaw puzzles, since we weren't supposed to go out.
- Hearing words of wisdom concerning my health (doctor's appointments).
- Writing and receiving notes.
- The Christmas Story.
- Reading (*Don't be Afraid* by Angela Finet, *The Book of Hope* by Jane Goodall and Douglas Abrams, books by David McClullough. The *Speak Peace* Brethren Press devotional).

### *Where have you found hope throughout your life?*

- In my church family.
- Attending Sunday School and making lifelong friends.
- Reading Corinthians 13 over and over again.
- Having a brother who went into BVS to help the underprivileged . . .
- Belonging to a church (Church of the Brethren) that does so much good around the world.

Our conversations from these two questions were very rich and uplifting. Ask your Sunday School class, Bible study, or congregation these questions and rejoice in the conversations.



*Photos of children statues, used throughout this issue, were submitted by Ted Foster. These pictures were taken in August, 2021 at The Children's Memorial Garden, a cemetery in Hastings, Nebraska. The cemetery is next door to the Hastings Museum of Natural and Cultural History. This large museum has an extensive Kool-Aid display since Hastings is where Kool-Aid was invented.*

# Open Windows . . .

by Pastor Zach Spidel

*Are you familiar with the saying, “When God closes a door, He opens a window”? Looking back over the past two years of COVID, we all have experienced daily changes. Leaders have made decisions that leave us feeling completely out of control. Whether or not you agree with those decisions, all change brings an element of grief. However, we do have a choice about how we respond to each change. Hopelessness comes as you choose to focus on what you’ve lost. But, if you can look at the ways God opens windows to move into an even better way of life, hope rises. Read below how our East Dayton Congregation has responded to change over the past two years of pandemic life.*

Not quite two years ago, following a careful and Spirit-led process of discussion, the Shepherd’s Table church plant and the East Dayton Church of the Brethren merged into a single new worshipping community called the East Dayton Fellowship. We went through an exciting time of growth as we reached out in new ways. Each Sunday homeless folks from the blocks around us, members of a local addiction recovery ministry, longtime Church of the Brethren members, original planting members of Shepherd’s Table, and new friends from the neighborhood all came together to worship God, and then the pandemic hit.

## **The Pandemic Closes a Door and God Opens a Window**

The East Dayton Fellowship was leading weekly Bible studies and starting a homeless ministry with the Salvation Army’s Adult Rehabilitation Center (ARC) in Dayton when COVID permanently shuttered the ARC. The plans we had been making with our wonderful partners came to a sudden end. Our goodbyes were painful, and we wondered what God wanted us to do next.

It turns out we did not have to wait long to find out. The same week the ARC shuttered we were contacted by a group called the Food for the Journey Project. They wanted to know if we would partner with them in becoming a site for the distribution of warm, home-cooked meals for the needy in our neighborhood! Not only were we thrilled to say “yes,” but we began to build up a clothing and household goods ministry to accompany the food ministry. Every Friday we set up outside (even in the winter) and distributed 100-200 hot meals, clothing, books, and other materials to neighbors

in need. This ministry has granted us so many chances to share Jesus with other people.

Just last Friday a couple we’ve known for a long time but hadn’t seen recently stopped by to get some food. They’ve been plagued by homelessness and addiction for decades. They finally have a proper roof over their heads, but their hearts were broken that day. They choked up as they told me that their youngest son, who is in prison, had just been thrown into solitary confinement. He would not be getting out until late in November - an almost unthinkable long and cruel confinement. When this young man was a boy, I frequently had him and his brothers in my house for youth events and Bible studies. I’ve visited him many times in the county jail and prayed frequently for him. Hearing about his condition broke my heart too. So, the three of us did the only thing that made sense in that moment. We huddled in the parking lot, held hands, and cried out to God for help. When we were done, my friends’ eyes were shining and they whispered a thank you. Then they went to get some food and some items they needed to help furnish their home. They departed that day fed in body and spirit.







## And the Windows Keep Opening

Not long after we began building up this Friday ministry, we discovered that a Christ-centered sober-living ministry had just finished renovating and opening a house across the street from the church. Addiction is a huge issue on the east side of Dayton, so we were thrilled to have these men as neighbors. We reached out to see if we could be of service to them, and it turned out they didn't have adequate space to host their weekly, all-residents meeting. Now we open our doors to them every Thursday for that purpose. This enables us to build relationships with them and we have had several people start attending on Sunday from this group. It also has enabled us to partner together with them in pulling off events that bless our neighborhood.

## Wrapping Up

There's a lot more we could tell you about, like our weekly outdoor summer vespers services held right on Third Street, our school supply drive for neighborhood kids, our relationally driven benevolence ministry, or the membership class we've started. Pastor Susan is heading a youth ministry, and we are making significant and costly investments in our facility so that it can be a focal point for God's restorative work in our neighborhood. For now, though, I want to close by asking you to consider helping us embody the love of Jesus for our beleaguered but beautiful neighborhood.

*Printed by permission and taken from the East Dayton/ Shepherd's Table newsletter.*

# Camping and Retreat Ministries and COVID

*by Karen Dillon*

COVID has touched every aspect of life as we know it. The Camping and Retreat Ministries has been challenged to adapt its programming to keep everyone safe. Being in close quarters for playing, sleeping, eating, studying, and even singing became unsafe. Gathering in groups for retreats, camps, and meetings was transformed into Zoom events.

Over the past two years we have had to cancel camps and replace them with creative events either outside or through Zoom. Being on Zoom was exciting at first, but children and teens lost interest in having camp on Zoom. They said they missed the in-person contact.

Women, on the other hand, found having retreats and evening events using Zoom to be a wonderful way to stay connected. Fall retreats were well attended and

spiritually fulfilling. Two evening gatherings were filled with fun and sharing gifts and talents. It became clear that wearing comfortable clothes and shoes, being able to get up and stretch, not driving in poor weather or at night, and attending while living far away or out of state were advantages. Some ladies who physically could not attend in person were able to join from the comfort of their homes. Future planning of women's activities will probably include an online connection portion for those unable to come in person.

Picnics during the summer brought people of all ages together. These new events at Salem Church of the Brethren's shelter and playground gave everyone the opportunity to be together, at a safe distance. Once again members of the District felt the beauty of community

through these simple gatherings on Sunday evenings.

The Camping and Retreat Ministries Committee will continue to think creatively as they plan for events, camps, and retreats. The safety of all our participants is one of our primary concerns. However, God has blessed the committee's members with insight, great ideas, and the ability to work through the challenges faced in dealing with such a time as this.





## How Did We End Up Here?

by Barbara Menke

I frequently ask my daughter, Anna, “How are you doing?” This is not just a polite question. I really want to know. My daughter Anna is a physician at a federally qualified health center in Ohio. These last two years of the pandemic have been stressful in health care.

She often replies, “I am doing okay.” But this week in February, she went on to say that her health care associates more frequently are having a particular conversation. The conversation starts with something like “This work is getting harder to do everyday” or “I am not enjoying my work like I did before COVID.” She explains that at the beginning of the pandemic, health care workers were recognized as heroes who risk their own lives for the sake of others. But these days, some view health care workers as villains because they recommend wearing masks and getting vaccines. Anna said in frustration, “Misinformation in the media has resulted in a distrust of medical providers. It has affected my therapeutic relationship with some of my patients. I have dedicated many years of my life to studying medicine in order to help people... how did we end up here?”



Where is “here” exactly? Hopefully by the time this article is in print, there will be a decline in the new cases, hospitalization, and deaths from COVID. However, we are living in a time where mistrust has become common place. Suspicion has replaced confidence in other people’s good will. It has happened in health care, but also in churches, schools, and all parts of our community. Frustration and resentment is understandable. Loss and sadness are ever-present. It is helpful to acknowledge these feelings. These are challenging times for all of us. Asking questions and seeking a deeper understanding is healthy; too much suspicion can be unhealthy—even deadly.

How do we make room for fresh hope and rebuild trust in one another? We have a God who is with us and for us - as individuals and the whole of humanity. As children of God, we too are to be with one another and for one another. Jesus’ final instructions were to love one another. While not a simple task in uncertain times like ours, love in action moves us in a helpful direction. The courage to act with kindness is contagious. The joy of offering a helping hand is infectious in the best possible way. Neighborliness is transmissible in a connected community. We can catch the joy of it from one another. If hope is to rise among us, it will be when we choose to move beyond ourselves and take action for the benefit of each other. Hope put into the actions of mutual caring may be the most effective treatment for us all.

Anna says that occasionally a patient takes the time to acknowledge that these are challenging times in health care. The patient may say something like, “I appreciate that you are here and taking care of people like me.” These encouraging words mean a lot. As a mom of a doctor, I ask you to speak up when you have a chance, and thank your health care provider. The COVID pandemic has been a very long haul for them.



*Barbara Menke with her daughter, Dr. Anna Hatic*

# Unswerving Hope

by Rebecca Middlestetter

The start of a new year often brings with it a sense of hope. We feel like we're getting a fresh start; getting a chance to do better, or have better things coming. When I put that hope in myself, to somehow make grand changes with my own strength, I am always disappointed. But when I put that hope in my Lord and look for Him moving, I am always satisfied.

At Brookville Church of the Brethren, the new year brought a new pastor! We are incredibly grateful for the service of our interim pastor, Fred Bernhard, and will miss him and his wife, Joice, dearly. We are also excited to bring on Mike Trott as our new full-time pastor. He is already demonstrating to us and to our community how he loves God, people, and God's Word. His arrival came just as COVID was making its way through our congregation. However, after a couple of Zoom services, we have gone back to meeting in person on Sundays. We are excited to see how the Lord will use us all in the coming year.

Our lives will have trials and afflictions, but Hebrews 10:23 reminds us to "hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful." Hope is an action, not just something we claim to have. It's a lot easier to hold on to our hope when things are going well. But how much greater is our testimony when the world says things are bad and yet we "unswervingly" hold on to our hope in Jesus?



*Interim District Executive, Nick Beam and Brookville Administrative Body Chair, Charlene Foster lay hands on Pastor Mike Trott at installation service.*

## Together

**Together** is a bi-annual publication of the Southern Ohio/Kentucky District Church of the Brethren. Thank you to all who have contributed to this publication. The theme for our next magazine is "Celebrate God's Abundant Goodness". Submissions of original artwork, poetry, as well as stories of ways we work together, or ways your church fulfills our mission of being Jesus' hands and feet in your community are always welcome. All submissions are subject to approval and editing by the Together editorial staff. Authors of original articles will be given the opportunity to preview before article is published.

If you would like to receive this publication, send mailing information to PO Box 785 Greenville, OH 45331, or email to [sodcob@brethren.org](mailto:sodcob@brethren.org). Although the publication is being mailed free of charge, donations to help cover expenses are welcome and can be made to the District at PO Box 785 Greenville, OH 45331. Copyright©2021

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