



# Thanks be to God!

*“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).*

**Looking toward the Thanksgiving season**, MESSENGER put out a question to pastors, chaplains, and other clergy in the denomination: What are you grateful for in your ministry? We asked for short responses that highlight some of the blessings they encounter amid the challenges of their work. Following are some of their answers. We hope they fill your heart with a measure of gratitude, too, as we partner together in the ministry of the church.

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## Singing into special connections

**While serving** as a chaplain in retirement facilities, hospitals, and hospice, I was privileged to visit a variety of people. At the first skilled nursing facility, I met an elderly woman who had been diagnosed with dementia. Our encounter was so meaningful that it became the highlight of my ministry.

I introduced myself before sitting next to this small, white-haired woman in a high-backed wheelchair. The only other information that I knew about Mabel was that she had a faith background. Early in our visit, I realized that her dementia was so advanced that we were unable to communicate

using the spoken word. Since I was raised in the church and had memorized many hymns, I started to sing the first verse of “Amazing Grace.” My heart was deeply touched as Mabel sang every word with me! Other songs were “In the Garden,” “The Old Rugged Cross,” and “Jesus Loves Me.” God truly blessed us that day with a very meaningful connection.

Singing became a special part of my ministry with both the living and the dying. I was truly on “sacred ground” when walking with others through suffering or pain. Chaplaincy gave me a rich opportunity to serve through word, presence, and song. My time with Mabel taught me that finding a special connection is so important as we serve others.

**Jill Keyser Speicher**  
Chaplain, Lititz, Pa.

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## Knitting the body together

**The pandemic** pushed our congregation, like most, to try new things at an accelerated pace. One of the new things we tried at Highland Avenue (Elgin, Ill.) was holding love feasts in small groups throughout the building to mitigate the possibility of virus spread.

It worked out well enough in 2022. But in 2023, some of us balked at not returning to the time-honored way of doing things. I understood and even shared the sentiment. When confronted that Maundy Thursday evening, though, I declined to change the plan already set in motion.

As I gathered the small group leaders for pre-service prayer on the

heels of this conflict, I was gifted with a declaration I still treasure. After the heated, high-stakes years of the pandemic, it seemed nothing less than a miracle to hear one leader proclaim, “Well, I don’t like this, and I wouldn’t vote for it. But if this is what you’re doing, I’ll help you do it.”

It doesn’t always happen that we can clearly state our perspective and stay supportive of one another. But I am immensely grateful for all the times we are able to knit the body of Christ together with that kind of integrity, good humor, and grace.

**Katie Shaw Thompson**  
Pastor, Highland Avenue  
Church of the Brethren, Elgin, Ill.

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## Living into leadership

**A**s an interim pastor, ministry consultant, and coach to pastors, I am grateful for those church leaders who are willing to look at the challenges their churches face and say, “It’s going to take some work, but we can overcome this challenge; for the sake of the Gospel and the sake of the church.”

Sometimes that means taking a position we know may not be popular publicly but is clearly a Jesus position. Other times it looks like not bending to the will of a bully in the congregation (yes, they’re out there). Perhaps most often, it’s the courage to say, “We have a problem that needs our attention,” without that clear-eyed acknowledgement being seen as a sign of unbelief in the church or God. Instead, it’s a belief that God is calling us ever-forward into a changing world that needs Jesus’ way now just as much as ever. Thank you, church leaders!

**Greg Davidson Laszakovits**  
Church consultant, Elizabethtown, Pa., and  
interim pastor, Grossnickle Church of the  
Brethren, Myersville, Md.

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## Thankful in retirement

**L**ooking back on 77 years, I am deeply grateful for the huge variety of people with whom I have been associated in my various ministries. After a short stint as pastor, I served for 19 years on the staff of Bethany Theological Seminary. There I got to know prospective students, international students, students in ministry placements, alumni, faculty, administrators, donors, board members, and more. What a privilege!

When the seminary moved from our home in Lombard, Ill., I took a job with the Illinois Association of School Boards. These school board members were citizens wanting to learn how to make their communities better places. Again, a privilege.

Back in college I felt called to ministry because I wanted to help God’s people continue the work of Jesus. I received the gift of working with a wide array of wonderful people, all part of God’s blessed community.

**John Cassel**  
Retired minister, Chicago First  
Church of the Brethren

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## Invited into sacred spaces

**O**ne of the significant joys of pastoring a congregation is the *earned honor* of congregants sharing their innermost thoughts, questions, and complexities. With time, trust develops between the congregants and pastor, opening a safe space for disclosing those precious life stories.

Within the spiritual setting, God’s loving faithfulness becomes both a reminder and a new opportunity for finding peacefulness and joy within everyday circumstances as an outcome

of trusted conversation. What greater joy for each one of us providing pastoral leadership, than to serve as a living channel for the grace of God to flow freely as gift to the world!

**Jan Glass King**  
Retired pastor, Wyomissing (Pa.)  
Church of the Brethren

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## A perfectly imperfect community

**I**’m grateful to serve a solid church family in a small town. I’m grateful that the church in which I grew up has invested in me and now relies on me for pastoral ministry. I’m grateful that we are a friendly church where people feel welcomed and cared for.

When I look around and see churches full of conflict and nastiness, I thank God for our church. We sure don’t get everything right, but we try to work together with grace. We appreciate a variety of music and expressions





of worship. We gather together for fellowship events. We work side-by-side and walk hand-in-hand. We reach out to the world beyond us, and we look out for each other, too. We study God's Word and try to discern his will for us as a family.

More and more, we are growing to see that politics and petty disagreements have no place in the church. As sisters and brothers, we are called to practice unity in diversity. I am daily humbled and blessed to co-pastor Rummel Church of the Brethren!

**Abby R. Shaffer**  
Co-pastor, Rummel Church  
of the Brethren, Windber, Pa.

## Grateful for Brethren distinctives

**A**fter raising four children, I came as a convert from Presbyterianism to the Church of the Brethren at age 55. Following 10 years of membership and attending Fuller Seminary, I was asked to be a part-time pastor and served for 20 years.

Throughout this unique experience, I have been privileged to appreciate the

distinct emphases of the Brethren faith, including a commitment to community as found in the early church as they broke bread together. It is supported by Peter's holy priesthood of all believers, ministering to one another. Part of this break-away reformation included the idea that a person's decision to follow Christ could only be made by a person old enough to make such a commitment.

The ruler of the state is not in control of our personal relationship to God in Jesus Christ, as had been true throughout most of history. I stand in awe of the history of persecution and migration this revolutionary belief caused its believers. And this church community is regularly blessed by the feetwashing and love feast that brings them together with ties that bind our hearts in Christian love.

**Elizabeth G. Rowan**  
Retired pastor, Pasadena (Calif.)  
Church of the Brethren

## Unseen circles of influence

**A**fter recently recovering from a Sunday morning emergency gallbladder surgery, I'm filled with gratitude. The Prince of Peace congregation stepped up and carried on, with a powerful sermon by church member Barbara Avent and talents from many others, putting into action our bulletin statement that "Ministers = All of us!" My gratefulness overflowed again as I saw the waves of messages and texts flowing in with prayers and words of encouragement from friends near and friends far away.

The circles of influence of a pastor are much wider than we often recall

or even know. The way we live our lives in imitation of the Good Shepherd may never be visible to us, but it is not invisible. This is the power of the beloved community that the world cannot give and the world cannot take away.

**Gail Erisman Valeta**  
Pastor, Prince of Peace Church of the  
Brethren, Littleton, Colo.

## A journey into ministry

**P**astoral ministry has taken me to several church locations. I have had the privilege to be part of people's lives and faith, their weddings and child dedications and day-to-day ministries. I have held the hand of grieving parents, spouses, and children as they wait for the inevitable. I have watched and celebrated as kids find their faith through Sunday school and church camp.

All this has been possible because of my life experiences. I grew up in a Sunday school that taught me and others about the love of God and helped me realize my faith. Later I spent two years in Brethren Volunteer Service, and the work I did in BVS became invaluable in my ministry. (Who knew? Oh, God did!) Before ministry I taught preschool-age children and spent summers at a variety of camps—again, God's preparation I believe.

Along my journey, I have had difficult moments and moments of joy, things that make me laugh and ones that make me cry out in pain. But I am convinced that these times have helped me understand what others need.

**Lisa Fike**  
Pastor, Woodland Church  
of the Brethren, Astoria, Ill.

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## Grounded in God

**I** am forever grateful for the faithfulness of our mighty God. He called me away from a career in accounting to serve in full-time ministry 26 years ago, and he has proven himself faithful in so many ways. He has given me words to say and allowed me to serve him beyond any of my human capabilities, despite my failures and weaknesses.

He has blessed and prospered my family through every situation, especially that initial transition. He has brought wonderful people into my path in the two congregations I have served, without whom my life would be so much poorer. Above all, his precious Word and his awesome promises remain sure and steadfast, the rock on which my hope is built. He has given us salvation in his Son, Jesus the Christ!

**David Ulm**

Pastor, Woodbury (Pa.) Church of the Brethren

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## A family found

**A**ctor **Sterling K. Brown** says, “Always have an attitude of gratitude.” With that attitude of gratitude, on July 2 I organized a party at my house with the help of Linda Simler and Donna Reuter to say “THANK YOU” to all my Freeport Church of the Brethren family members for doing everything to keep the church running so smoothly and also for helping me personally with things that are becoming exceedingly difficult for me to do.

Twenty years ago I was in India and was struggling to stay alive because I had converted to

Christianity and the Hindus couldn’t stand one of their own becoming a Christian. Today I have a church family who loves me and cares for me even though I don’t look like them! I am grateful to the Church of the Brethren and Bethany Theological Seminary for welcoming me into the fold, which led me to my wonderful church family. Every church member contributes to the smooth running of the church. I love everyone and will always work diligently for God, for the Freeport congregation and for the Church of the Brethren because I am grateful to God for giving me this church family.

**Christina Singh**

Pastor, Freeport (Ill.) Church of the Brethren

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## Woven into the tapestry of life

**P**astoral ministry is a journey filled with many ups and downs. Fifty years ago, when I was a student at Bethany Theological Seminary on the old campus in Oak Brook, Ill., I resisted the call to pastoral ministry. Over the span of 40 years in the

ministry, however, I was privileged to witness the profound impact the church has had on lives, families, and communities.

Because I finally accepted that call, I have had the opportunity to guide, support, and uplift individuals in their spiritual and personal growth. It is a privilege that deepens with time. The gratitude I feel emanates from the connections formed, the moments of comfort provided, and the transformational power of faith. After decades of service, a pastor becomes woven into the tapestry of people’s lives, celebrating joys and providing comfort during hardships. The knowledge that one’s words and actions have played a role in helping others navigate challenges and find hope is profoundly humbling.

Since I retired, I can say each step of my pastoral journey carries with it a deep sense of gratitude that is hard to put into words. It’s a testament to a life devoted to something greater, and the privilege of being a source of light and support in the lives of countless individuals.

**David K. Hendricks**

Retired pastor, Prince of Peace Church of the Brethren, South Bend, Ind.

Christina Singh





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## Walking with one another

**Since July 29, 1979**, I've served as a pastor in the Church of the Brethren, for which I am grateful. I am grateful for the Church of the Brethren, the home that found me. Like Ruth in the Hebrew scriptures, where we go, I go. Where we dwell, I dwell. Our people are my people. God is God.

I am grateful for our historic shared commitment to purposefully walk with scripture and each other for as long as it takes. I am grateful for the patient forbearance of so many in the churches I've served. I am especially grateful for the opportunity to walk together with sisters and brothers in the worst of times, through tears towards the promise of the rainbow.

**Frank Ramirez**

Pastor, Union Center Church of the Brethren, Nappanee, Ind.

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## Riding a rewarding roller coaster

**While I was on vacation** in August, an e-mail came to my work inbox from a mother who said, "I believe you were the chaplain

who baptized my son two days before he died 18 years ago. I have not been able to attend the annual celebration of life at the hospital, but I want to finally come this year. I hope you will be there."

Performing rituals. Saying prayers. Standing with parents and family as a child takes his or her last breath. This is the call of a pediatric chaplain. No one can take the pain away. We listen and support as the family lets us into their lives. And when a mother reaches out after 18 years to celebrate her child's brief life, the value of relationship is lifted up. It is a gift to journey with families through tragic grief and tremendous joy and allow God's love and light to shine.

Edward K. Ziegler entitled the message at my ordination "The Majesty and Misery of Ministry." That was 35 years ago, and it is still true today. Answer the call, and know God is with you as you ride the roller coaster of ministry!

**Becky Baile Crouse**

Chaplain, Children's Mercy Hospital, Warrensburg, Mo.

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## Unbounded blessings

**I have been blessed** to minister in many different ways over the years. In my everyday life, I am a mom of two wonderful children who bring me a life of challenges and joy. In my regular work life, I am a teacher of kindergarten students who come from various backgrounds and full of various needs.

In my church life, I serve my congregation from a distance yet drive almost every Sunday an hour to worship with my brothers and sisters.

In my district life, I allow myself to be on a pulpit supply list and have been blessed to travel many miles and states to serve other pastors, giving them the break they need and developing a relationship with their congregations as we get to know each other in kindred love.

So what am I grateful for? I am grateful that the spirit of our loving God travels a distance, knows no boundaries, and uses me to continue growing the kingdom wherever I am and in whatever stage of life I am living!

**Sarah Mason**

Ordained minister, Monitor Church of the Brethren, McPherson, Kan.

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## Small but committed

**As a pastor** of a small congregation, I am grateful for the dedication to and the love for God shown by this congregation. They are committed to following Jesus and stepping out into our community and living out Jesus in our neighborhood. It is an honor to walk with them on this journey!

**Frances Beam**

Pastor, Living Faith Church of the Brethren, Concord, N.C.

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## God-given gifts

**The Ashland Dickey** church in Ohio hosts a sunflower festival that draws hundreds. This event is the largest responsibility of my workload—planning meetings, little details, expectations, implementing last year's notes, and having it all pulled together on time.

It can be daunting, but as I look through the photographs, I am overwhelmed with great fullness. I am overflowing with joy thinking of the 61 volunteers and the giftedness with which God has blessed each of them. We have “people people,” cooks, fun-game people, organized people, creative people, plumbing people, and directing-parking-in-fields-after-10-inches-of-rain people, and God has intricately woven us all together in this little ol’ church on the hill.

God has inspired us and bestowed talents upon us. United, we present our gifts, becoming a beacon of Christ’s love to our community. The sight of God’s beauty working through his people fills my heart with great joy and my eyes with big tears. I am so blessed to be here. I see a glimpse of the unity and perfection God promises, and I look forward to the day we all experience that together.

**Jessi Adams**  
Director, One Generation  
Ministries, Ashland (Ohio)  
Dickey Church of the Brethren

## Reflecting love and grace

**A**s a pastor, there are so many things for which to be thankful in ministry. First and foremost, the servant hearts that make worship services and other events possible, and then those attending with cheerful hearts to unite together, is simply amazing.

Witnessing in love to our community through our Gathering Place café with quality breakfast items and fair trade coffee, as well as our food bank and “feed them” program is such a blessing. The gratitude I have for our ministry teams that fulfill our vision and mission is astounding.

But more than anything, I’m thankful for a God that demonstrates his love and grace to us every single day. Without the guidance of his Holy Spirit, we wouldn’t live with the holy focus we have. Praise to Jesus!

**Matt Christ**  
Pastor, Little Swatara  
Church of the Brethren, Bethel, Pa.

## Overflowing into the community

**I**am thankful to serve a congregation that owns the ministries of the church. At First Church of the Brethren in Eden, N.C., we have a lot going on.

In just a couple years, we have started some significant projects focused on bringing Jesus to the neighborhood: We host a semi-monthly free community lunch, The Brethren Bistro, that feeds about 100 people two Saturdays per month. We have a community garden, The Garden of Eden Community Vegetable Patch, that has provided produce to more than 40 families within walking distance of our church building. We host a Red Cross blood drive every other month and typically collect around 30 units of blood.

The amazing thing about all these ministries and more is the people involved in them. A few people choose to be involved in just about everything, but by and large we have tons of people staffing these outreach efforts. No one has to feel like they have to be involved in everything or it will be understaffed. First Church of the Brethren is living out the idea that “saved people serve people,” and for that I am thankful.

**Doug Diamond**  
Pastor, First Church of the  
Brethren, Eden, N.C.

## A congregation with a big heart

**F**riendship Church of the Brethren is part of the Southeastern District, located in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains of North Carolina. They could be described as a small congregation with a big heart.

The things I’m thankful for could fill volumes, but these three thoughts float—like cream—to the top: First, for the grounded leadership of seniors within the congregation. They are leaders willing to disciple others, who know the Bible and live a life of love and compassion. Second, for a congregation that embraces people fighting addictions and homelessness, and people often overlooked in society. They willingly seek ways to help with others’ physical, spiritual, and emotional needs. This is a body of believers where more than half of their expenditures each year reaches beyond their congregation. And third, I’m thankful for a congregation filled with the Spirit, that exalts Jesus, and reaches out to humanity.

**Wallace Cole**  
Pastor, Friendship Church of the Brethren,  
North Wilkesboro, N.C.

