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Hope

Hope

Natural signs of hope

by Joshua Brockway

Somehow, hope is not a key word in the vocabulary of my faith.

That probably has a lot to do with the way American culture has shaped me. Theologian Willie James Jennings says that masculine self-sufficiency is one of the key ideological myths of the dominant culture. So, to look toward hope as part of my discipleship is to contradict the stories I internalized most of my life. Hope says that there is something not within my individual ability to control, to make happen.

Yet, after my ruptured aneurysm and during the warm spring months of the pandemic, hope found me. When the world and my own body were limiting what I could do as an individual, a nest of cardinals showed me what hope looks like.

When the flicker of Zoom screens and the noise of e-learning for my children was too much, I would often go outside. The cardinals would swoop back and forth from their nest to the big pine tree in our backyard. I could not miss that bright red flash across the sky. Pretty soon, I got to the place where I could hear their songs before I saw them.

Throughout the summer I started noticing those cardinals and the songs of the other birds in our yard. In the craziness of those months in quarantine, the natural busyness of the birds reminded me that there is more to God's good creation than just what I myself can do by sheer force of my will.

Now each morning I walk out the front door I take half a second to listen and look for the birds of our neighborhood. Our cardinals still nest in the bush. And the mourning doves sing on the electric wires. A redtail hawk even shows itself on the roof the school. And on a rare quiet evening, I can hear the hoot of an owl somewhere close.



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When all everything around us seems chaotic, the routine and simple patterns of nature ground me in the hope that God has more going on than my anxious desire to control can fathom. Noticing those cardinals, and stopping to pay attention to the beauty of creation, is a key practice to nurture hope. It should be no surprise, then, that the Psalms often speak of the wonders of creation as signs of God's steadfast love. **W**

Joshua Brockway is director of spiritual formation for the Church of the Brethren.

“When all everything around us seems chaotic, the routine and simple patterns of nature ground me in the hope that God has more going on.”



On this rock

by Mary Jessup

Like many readers of this magazine, I worry about the future of my beloved church. Having been raised with a fundamentalist reading of scripture, I was in my 20s when I wandered into a Church of the Brethren and for the first time heard the gospel as “Good News.” This denomination has given me an education, a vocation, a husband, and a community.


As I write these words, it is 3 a.m. I can’t sleep. The church feels so fragile, as though it could crumble before my eyes. But I know the dawn will come, and with the light of day my fears will subside.

What will make the difference in the morning? Scripture.

At Bethany Theological Seminary, then in Oak Brook,

Ill., I began to see the big picture of the biblical story. God spoke the world into existence and continues to speak, giving guidance, correction, and hope to all who listen.

In the morning I’ll read reassuring words such as “. . . on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.”

My hope for the church is based on biblical promises. I’m convinced that change, even painful change, is inevitable and necessary, but I rest on the promise that Jesus made to his disciples: “I am with you always, to the end of the age.” 

Mary Jessup is a retired pastor currently serving on the shared ministry team of Springfield (Ill.) First Church of the Brethren and as TRIM coordinator for Illinois/Wisconsin District.

Hope is a muscle

by Don Fitzkee

What do you do when you are invited to write about hope and you are feeling pretty hopeless? It feels like such a dark time as our federal government scapegoats and targets immigrants, even shutting down legal pathways for refugees; cuts off life-sustaining humanitarian aid to people all around the world; effectively shuts down government agencies and nonprofits who exist to serve and meet human need; and bullies even our closest neighbors and allies. And that's just this week.

Things aren't much brighter in the church. We've been arguing over the same issues for going on 50 years now, contributing to an ongoing decline and schism. Come July 6, when my term as Annual Conference moderator begins, I'm supposed to offer some hopeful leadership. I could use some help.

The January/February issue of *Christianity Today* included excerpts from Mike Cospers's conversation with journalist Krista Tippett, host of *On Being*—the former public radio program and now podcast—and author of the book *Becoming Wise*. Cospers asked Tippett to talk more about her view of hope. Here's some of what she said:

I think a lot about hope, and these days I mostly just leap and say, "Hope is a muscle." And what I'm contrasting is, a muscle is different from wishful thinking and it's different from assuming or believing that things will turn out all right in the end. The way I think about hope is reality-based. It's not optimism.

It's a refusal to accept the way you are told things have to be. It's a refusal to insist that the world has to be this way. And then hope, the muscle, is throwing what we can of our life, our will, our energy, our intelligence, our creativity, our care behind that insistence.

Hope is envisioning a better world and then throwing


ourselves into shaping such a world, says Tippett. Jesus called this world "the kingdom of God." He gave the keys to the kingdom to Peter and told him that Christ's church ultimately would prevail over evil (Matthew 16:17-19). Jesus didn't say it would be easy.

Shane Claiborne, of Red Letter Christians, in a recent letter to supporters, advocated a view of hope similar to Tippett's. "Hope is an act of resistance," he wrote. "It always has been."

Hope is a muscle. Hope is resistance. Resistance training is how we build muscle. We then exercise our muscles to build hope.

The Brethren have been at our best when we have united around a common purpose—like the early 20th century missionary era when we sought to take the gospel to the whole world. Or the Brethren Service era when we dedicated ourselves to rebuilding Europe after World War II.

More recently, we poured our money and ourselves into helping brothers and sisters in Haiti rebuild after the 2010 earthquake. And we came to the aid of our Nigerian brothers and sisters under attack from terrorists by channeling more than \$5 million through the Nigeria Crisis Fund from 2014 to 2019, with continuing support on a smaller scale even now. Those efforts were born of hope and offered hope to others.

These still feel like dark times to me. In that same letter Claiborne quoted Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: "Only when it is dark enough can you see the stars." Maybe it's time for the church to exercise hope and shine like stars in the dark night sky as we stand with the most vulnerable among us. Sometimes things at their worst bring out the best in God's people. Let's hope for that. 

Don Fitzkee, pastor of worship at Lancaster (Pa.) Church of the Brethren, is moderator-elect of the Church of the Brethren Annual Conference.

“ Maybe it’s time for the church to exercise hope and shine like stars in the dark night sky as we stand with the most vulnerable among us. ”

Thank God for hope

by Greg Davidson Laszakovits

Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; pursue hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them (Romans 12:12-14).

I must confess to you, dear reader: I don’t like this scripture very much right now. Don’t get me wrong: I’m all for contributing to the needs of the saints and pursuing hospitality to strangers. I can even work at blessing those who persecute me (even if a few curses come across my mind, if not my lips). That’s nonviolent Jesus-following 101.

But, come now: “Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction”? You have got to be kidding me. Not only am I supposed to endure hardship—I’m supposed to *like* it?

Confession continued: When invited to write this reflection on hope, my first thought was *ugh*. I struggled. Where do I find hope these days? I can easily identify where humanity is on the backslide and hope seems lost. Malice and vengeance have taken over our politics. Our communities are increasingly divided. The most vulnerable among us are aggressively and gleefully demonized and scapegoated by the most powerful. The very definition of “truth” is up for grabs as lying becomes the standard.

“Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction”? Spare me. It all sounds passive, even defeatist, at a time when we should be standing up and resisting.


Then I was given a reality check that I didn’t feel much like cashing. I am honored to be the stateside liaison to the Church of the Brethren in Brazil. Each month, Global Mission staff ask leaders in our sibling churches around the globe to submit prayer requests, which are then broad-

cast out to the Church of the Brethren. In my role, I see these requests arrive in real time. And my perspective on hope shifts.

While I lament the decline of democracy in the US, our brothers and sisters elsewhere are navigating full-fledged dictatorships, collapsed governments, and debilitating social oppression. As we here in the US rightly decry the defunding of important social safety nets, prayers for physical safety and basic human needs arrive in my email inbox—literal prayers for the widows and orphans among them.

And I am witness to the power of hope. I read prayers of hope and trust given to God: Hope that encourages us to keep our hands busy and our minds sharp advocating for others, while at the same time, hope that understands much is not in our hands. This is uncomfortable for me as a problem-solving person of action.

I realize how shallow my view of hope has been—how much I’ve allowed it to be shaped by the US news cycle. And I make my final confession to the sins of arrogance, anger, and being judgmental: To the prideful notion of placing the world on my shoulders and leaving God out of the equation. To the anger simmering just (barely) under the surface at my enemies and those who offer them aid and comfort. To judgmentalism, assuming I can identify someone’s character by their bumper stickers or clothes or jobs.

And yet, even in my resistance to Jesus’ way, I find gratitude. Because hope is still there. Even when I don’t want it. Even when I resist it. Even when it calls me to something beyond my own understanding. Thank God for hope. 

Greg Davidson Laszakovits is an ordained minister in the Church of the Brethren. He currently serves as interim pastor for University Baptist and Brethren Church in State College, Pa., and consults through GDL Insight (www.gdlinight.com). He lives in Elizabethtown, Pa.

Hope



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What hope can bloom

by Laura Stone

*W*hat hope can bloom in ravaged earth,
Turn wasteland into pasture?
What light can come when, far from home,
The exiled face disaster?
How, how can joy survive
In evil that seems sure to thrive?
Come, come and bring us home,
Our Hope, our Breath of Blessing.

When shall the chains of captives break,
The slaves go free, their debts released?
When shall the injured, fearful ones
Find safety, dwelling in full peace?
When, when will promise rise?
O loving God, hear longing cries!
Now, now let justice roll,
Our Hope, our Breath of Blessing.

What heart can cleanse, forgive, renew,
Bring laughter in the sadness?
What hand can mend, restore and tend,
Rebuild the streets of gladness?
Who, who fulfills this word
The angels sang, the prophets heard?
Come, come with healing touch,
Our Hope, our Breath of Blessing.

What covenant can here endure
Till sun and moon stop singing?
What promise is, like stars and sand,
Unmeasured wholeness bringing?
Where, where shall love made true
Proclaim God's grace for me, for you?
Here, here, let dawn arise,
Our Hope, our Breath of Blessing. 

Laura Stone is district executive minister of South/Central Indiana District of the Church of the Brethren.

This hymn is based on Jeremiah 33, especially verses 10-16, and can be sung to the tune of Greensleeves. Laura Stone notes that the name "Breath of Blessing" interacts with YHWH, the unpronounceable name of God used in this scripture, and recalls breath—our own breath, given to us by Divine Breath, who breathes hope into wastelands. Stone grants permission for broad use of the hymn, but asks users to seek permission to make any changes.

Superheroes among us

by Debra Lynn

A lot of people seem to have their cranky pants on right now. I'm sure there are various reasons for that: political and social justice concerns, the weather, rising prices, twisted undergarments, etc. I get it. I'm there, too, a lot more than usual lately.

I have to dig deep to find joy some days, but I believe there are nooks and crannies where I'll find it if I keep searching. Then, there are times when kindness just lands in your space and reminds you of your blessings.

My daughter Bethany has been going to the same clinic and seeing the same doctor for about 25 years now. They are familiar to her, and she trusts them completely. She actually loves going to visit, and I regard every person on staff there to be some kind of superhero. Likewise, they all know Bethany. They appreciate her quirky sense of humor, and they also understand her myriad challenges, one of which involves food.

Bethany has some pretty intense OCD going on in addition to autism, and this is often manifested by her intake of food. She must complete everything she starts: for instance, if she opens a bag of chips, she feels compelled to finish it in one sitting (not because she's hungry, but because she needs to empty the bag).

This has created some unusual routines at our house on grocery day, because we don't just put the groceries away. Often we have to pare things down to smaller portions in various containers (which sometimes works, but Bethany also needs many things to be in their original package). So, more often than not, we end up hiding certain items so that she will not make herself sick consuming an entire box of whatever.

This also means that when the rest of us want a hidden item, we resort to what feels like black ops in order to make ourselves a grilled cheese sandwich. If you think I'm exaggerating, ask Bethany's siblings, who have been living on their own long enough that they have to be reminded about the rules from their unusual childhood when they come for a visit. None of us complain about it and never have—it's just something that happens in the Lynn household that doesn't happen in most other families.

Anyway, Bethany's medical team understands this about her and our family, and they know nutritional concerns are not as easily addressed as they might seem.

Bethany had her yearly check-up scheduled in March, and this time her doctor requested some fasting labs in the days just before. The scheduler in the office put me in touch with the lab person directly to be sure I got detailed answers about the "fasting" part, so we don't have to repeat anything involving needles.

Bethany gets up to eat a lot in the middle of the night, with the frequency that most of us old folks get up to go to the bathroom. Robert and I sleep upstairs, and Bethany's room is downstairs near the kitchen, so fasting labs for Bethany means I stay up all night or snooze on a pallet in the dining room to keep her from eating anything.

Since it's a compulsion, it doesn't work to just tell her not to eat for 12 hours. I didn't have to say this to the clinic staff—they just connected those dots all on their own, even though I think it's been about four or five years since we've had to do any fasting labs for Bethany.


Long story long, I was talking with the lab person and she noticed that Bethany's appointment was rather late in the morning, around 10:30 or so. Again, I didn't express my concerns to her about that. She just had it on her radar.

She said, "I'm really sorry we don't have an earlier appointment available that day. That's going to be hard for her, isn't it?" I responded that it might be, but I would just let her sleep in that morning and that might help.

Her response was this: "Y'know, if she gets hungry or upset, just bring her in early. I'll squeeze her in somehow. It only takes about 15 minutes for me to do what I need to do. There's no point in making her wait if it's going to stress her out or cause her discomfort."

After the call ended, I got a little misty-eyed thinking about how much that little bit of extra care and consideration set my mind at ease—and could potentially help Bethany have a better day since she has to get poked by needles when she's already hangry.

Kindness. It's a thing, people. In this crazy world where bullying and cruelty seem to be more acceptable than ever (especially toward people who are defenseless), and when cruelty is even viewed by some as admirable, it sure did my heart and mind a lot of good to receive that kindness. That lab person was not just checking boxes to get her job done. She was actually thinking about the special needs of my family and digging a little deeper to make that situation go more smoothly for us.

There are still kind people in the world, and they are to be admired. They don't wear capes and armor, but they are heroes, nonetheless. If all of us tried a little harder to be someone's hero every day, what a beautiful world it would be. 

Debra Lynn is executive artistic director at Opera Today and was a long-time professor of music at Manchester University. She and her family live in North Manchester, Ind.

“ I have to dig deep to find joy some days, but I believe there are nooks and crannies where I'll find it. ”

Hope

Hope in difficult conversations

by Virginia Rendler

This past October, I had the pleasure of working with Manchester Church of the Brethren (North Manchester, Ind.) through the “seven prompts” developed by the denomination’s Standing with People of Color initiative. Along with a team of co-facilitators including Bob Gross, Jim Chinworth, and Ruth Barrett, we worked with a Sunday school group over the course of four weeks to dive into these questions.

This was a surprisingly hope-inspiring experience for me. I had expected a somewhat demoralizing conversation about how far we had to go as a community. I also had doubts about my own qualifications to present these questions about a subject on which I am far from an expert. This is a loaded topic, full of pitfalls and opportunities to say the “wrong” thing. It can be easy to get caught up in what we aren’t doing, see missed opportunities to be more welcoming, and feel the inherent hopelessness that comes from confronting such a big issue. However, I’m going to share with you what made this experience so uplifting and life-giving when I had expected the opposite.

The first element of this process that gave me hope was the attendance. Maybe I’m cynical, but the general consensus from the under-30 crowd seems to be that we’ve been forsaken

by the older generations and are solely responsible for social change.

This has been the opposite of my experience within the Church of the Brethren. Often, older adults have been the ones passionately leading the charge for a more inclusive community, and the ones showing up in spaces like this to have difficult conversations. As I surveyed the room, I became emotional at the sight of 20-25 members of the church who had taken an hour out of their Sunday to confront this topic, for four weeks in a row.

How lucky we are to be in a space that so seamlessly combines love and commitment to God with love and commitment to each other and the betterment of our community! I can’t imagine this is the case in all other places of worship—the inherent understanding that a space dedicated to Christianity is also a space called to address lived experiences of injustice.

There was no question about why this was a necessary conversation to have, or if it belonged in the church. The folks that showed up for this discussion came with an awareness that God’s love calls us to think critically about how we treat each other, and to engage in difficult and sometimes painful conversations about where we have come up short in that endeavor. I can’t think of anything more hopeful.

Another life-giving element of this experience was the structure. The questions were thoughtfully developed in a way that made it easy to engage with the subject, first starting with personal reflection, then a biblical context, and moving into a more practical, action-oriented conclusion. This meant that any conclusions drawn were supported by both historical lived experiences and biblical evidence. I was surprised how swiftly conversation began to flow, and how comfortable people felt sharing personal stories—even stories where they didn’t come off as the “good guy.”

I believe the credit for this accessible structure goes to the expertise and energy put into developing these prompts. How lucky we are to be a part of a denomination that has an organization devoted to helping our communities become more just and peaceful, enabling us to live in Beloved Community. I feel gratitude for being a part of a denomination that has this kind of support built into its structure, and that this support is so thoughtful and well-crafted. The presence of On Earth Peace, similar organizations, and other people who support this work is extremely hopeful and life-giving.

The final hopeful element is what came out of this month-long conversation. I sensed that participants were

The 7 Prompts

The “7 Prompts” arose out of the recent “Standing With People of Color” query that came to Annual Conference from Southern Ohio/Kentucky District. The response called for that district and On Earth Peace to develop resources, which included these seven discussion prompts:

1. Share your family’s origin story. Go back as many generations as you know and start there. Briefly share some of your family history/tree up to your current family.
2. Share a compelling memory of when you became aware of cultural, racial, or color differences.
3. Share the message Jesus has for you or us about justice and racism. What does Jesus want you to hear or see? What

does Jesus call you or us to do next?

4. If you listen to Jesus’ call, what spiritual healing or personal growth might you have to do?
5. If you are a white/dominant culture Brethren, how can you support/stand with people of color (POC)? If you are a POC, what does it mean for you to stand with other people of color?
6. Imagine if things were different and there were more racial justice. What do you envision?
7. What are you willing to sacrifice to achieve that goal?


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leaving having recommitted themselves to practices that foster inclusion and welcome. In our community, these commitments look like setting aside time to learn conversational Spanish or reaching a hand of welcome out to newcomers.

The variety of experiences in the room allowed us to better recognize the nuances and complications of coming up with “solutions” to racial inequity, and many of the conclusions drawn were interpersonal, small-scale changes to which we can each commit. If we each become more of a sanctuary from racial violence and oppression, our community will necessarily follow.

Sometimes, conversations about oppression or injustice can inspire dread or hopelessness, especially when we are called to examine our own shortcomings. I was anticipating some of these feelings as I entered this space. What I left with, however, was a renewed sense of appreciation for my community, hope for our future as a more welcoming space, and reverence for the structures and support systems that the Church of the Brethren provides for folks who want to do this work. I was welcomed and trusted as a leader through these prompts, and I in turn welcomed and trusted the experiences of the attendees, all of whom are leaders in their own right.

I encourage congregations of any size to use these prompts or adapt them to your community’s needs. We have a long way to go, to be sure, and that long road will be paved with hope, solidarity,

and community. It will be the great work of our shared life. 


Virginia Rendler is volunteer coordinator for Brethren Volunteer Service. She lives in North Manchester, Ind.



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Hope

Harvest in hope

by Purvi Satvedi

How many of you have ever worshiped with brothers and sisters in Christ with whom you have nothing in common? Perhaps you have a different ethnicity or language or culture or even way of worshipping.

The feelings that arise are hard to describe, but the best way to express them is through this verse: “After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Revelation 7:9).

You see, the one thing in common is the one that matters the most, and that is Christ.

It’s like what Paul says in Colossians 3:11: “[T]here is no longer Gentile and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, enslaved and free, but Christ is all and in all.” The connection is Christ. Christ is all and is in all!

My dear Brethren, don’t we know that one day in heaven we will be part of this kind of worship, with thousands and thousands of people we have never seen before. But where are these people coming from and who told them about Christ?

The answer: You did! You, who are fitted with a special kind of shoes—the shoes of the gospel of peace (Ephesians 6:15). You and I are ambassadors of the gospel of peace. We go and share the message, and that is how people from all walks of life around the world come to know the peace, joy, and love found in Christ.

When I traveled recently to India, God’s spirit placed a word my heart, and that word is “harvest.” I witnessed an incredible hunger for Jesus. It’s not just in India, but in the US as well. The harvest is ready.

Imagine a long summer of hard work—tilling the ground, sowing seeds, watering the land, and tending the crop. Now, the harvest is ready to be gathered—but no one is there to reap it. Wouldn’t that be heartbreaking?

Let me share a real-life story. Almost a decade before India received freedom from the British, around the late 1930s, there was a young man, David, in his mid-20s, who relocated to an industrialized city called Vadodara, Gujarat, in search of a job and a better life. He did find a good job and life, and then the rest of his family of five brothers and

sister and their families also relocated to this city.

Soon, he came across a man from Texas who told him about Christ. David accepted Jesus as his Savior and changed his last name to Christian. David knew a little bit of English and this missionary from the US knew only a little bit of Gujarati, but the Holy Spirit finished the work.


David fell in love with Christ. He started telling his family about Christ, but the family rejected him strongly. He was persecuted to the point where he would be beaten up and thrown in a ditch for his faith in Christ. He loved his widowed mother, but she told him “You are dead to me. I don’t want to see your face again.” His siblings laughed at him, except one, the youngest brother named Laxman. So in the end, two brothers became Christians and the rest remained Hindus.

I am the third generation of this young man David! On my trip to India, I was visited by many of these Christian family members—the descendants of David and Laxman, who are walking in Christ. I was invited to preach for a special celebration and a gathering of this Christian family, for a little girl, Flavia, granddaughter of my cousin Ronald Christian.

Today Flavia stands as the fifth generation in Christ. Do you see the ripple effect of one of you wearing the shoes of the gospel of peace, going and telling? One man from Texas followed the call and one man received it. Today, generations and generations are standing in the love of Christ—a ripple effect!

As a pastor, I know that many clergy experience the pain of dwindling numbers of our members inside the walls of our church. But today, I give you good news, dear ones, that there is hope! There are people who want to know about Jesus. Harvest is real!

Jesus said the harvest is ready, but the workers are few. Remember, you and I have said, “Here I am.”

Yes, you are the one! The harvest is ready—outside the walls. Will you go and share, wearing shoes of the gospel of peace? May the Spirit of God, lead you to the harvest. 

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