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The Danville News

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Thursday, August 15, 2024

"Seeking Answers"

Word Count: 750

Where have all the teachers gone? So asked Wayne Brookhart in his sobering Danville News column two weeks ago. He cited the decline in teacher certifications, fewer students enrolled to become teachers, district positions going unfilled, teachers without qualifications filling in. The result? "Quality classroom instruction," he wrote, is threatened.

Having been certified as an English teacher in preparation for my calling as a pastor (in our Presbyterian tradition pastors principally serve as teachers, the elders are the deciders), plus having a daughter who teaches in Colorado and another daughter who's the development director for a national educational non-profit, public schools are dear to my heart. God bless teachers, especially those for whom teaching isn't a job but a calling.

We join Wayne in seeking answers. If you cannot sail around the typhoon, sail straight into it. How do you solve problems? Solutions begin by making sure we ask the right questions. What's going on? Could it be low pay when weighed against loan indebtedness and housing costs? Have we succumbed to being obsessed by outcome-based thinking for measuring success? Perhaps because schools have become cultural battlegrounds? Perhaps because of eroding parental engagement and support? The stress of increasing mandates and the pressure of skewed expectations? Loss of respect for the profession? Investing more in stadiums and locker rooms than in libraries, arts, and sciences?

Brother Brookhart, the decline you lament parallels my profession. We cannot recruit pastors today, competent or otherwise. When I came in 1989 to my Presbytery we numbered forty-four congregations with thirty-three full-time pastors. Our Presbytery meetings lasted day-long, were substantive, often raucous. Sometimes the knives were out when we debated hot issues. I miss those days.

Nowadays if we get seven congregations represented, we are doing well. Nowadays? We number thirty congregations, five staffed by full-time pastors (one church is wobbling over the possibility of leaving because they think the rest of us aren't as righteous as they are).

Two congregations are searching for full-time pastors but cannot find credentialed pastors interested in them. Our bar is intentionally set high. We want trained and accountable pastors who actually have studied the Bible and are skilled at pastoral care. It's tough to draw new pastors to rural regions or small towns. Too many seminarians are overloaded by debt. Too many worry rightly about employment for their spouse. Enough of them want a town that boasts a Trader Joe's.

Sixteen of our congregations are served by part-time commissioned pastors or pastors from other denominations. Nine have given up searching for a part-time pastor and rely on pulpit supply.

Those of us who are retired, really aren't. We do what we can to support these folks who want to bear witness to their faith. But it's tough. Most of our buildings handicap ministry.

Partly, it's our own fault. Have we asked the right questions? Since when is Christianity outcome based? That's God's issue. Ours is being salt, shining. Do your job well, leave the rest up to God, thank you. Did we sell church as an oasis for righteous us rather than us getting busy watering the desert? Have we reversed how C.S. Lewis described the role of educators? "The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles but to irrigate deserts." Did we spend decades hanging so many medals on ourselves that our clothes ended up full of pin holes (a quip from writer George Ade). Perhaps we focused too much on the church as an institution made in our image rather than as a movement made in the image of the Christ? Did we encourage people to serve the church but neglect that the church's purpose is to serve and equip the people? Why fuss over the Ten Commandments when Jesus sees them fulfilled in the Sermon on the Mount? Do we offer the thin gruel of platitudes rather than help our people mature in their beliefs and practices? Third grade thinking of the Bible is fine, if you're a third-grader. Worse, have we sold our soul for political gain? Did we forget that to be anointed by God means not the throne but the cross?

We weary of hand wringing. "It is a lot easier to be morally indignant than constructive," preached Harry Emerson Fosdick. It's easy to highlight problems, harder is solving them, easy to boast, "I can fix it." Fine, tell us how. Solutions gestate inside these hard questions, which is why I remain ever hopeful. Good people rise up.