

The Danville News
Robert John Andrews
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"Hiraeth"
Word Count: 750

Yes, it could be considered really depressing. Still, I am so proud of them. Some might regard them as valiant. Since retiring from serving Grove Presbyterian Church, I've found myself imitating the little Dutch boy busily trying to help our various struggling congregations. Over these years, I have sensed how our people grieve much grief. One church last December prepared for Christmas Eve services, even deciding to decorate the disused Sanctuary and worship there through Advent and Christmas. They've since returned to worshipping in the downstairs chapel. Several church members reflected on the Christmases past when the Sanctuary was filled with over 300 parishioners celebrating the Christmas Eve candlelight service. This Christmas Eve twenty members gathered to sing Christmas carols and light candles to Silent Night.

Grief. So many losses these churches have suffered over these last decades, few victories in their lives. In one town, once thriving and prosperous, the cherished furniture store has been forced to shutter and close up shop. There are many explanations: changing culture, changing demographics, alienation, loneliness, the loss of social commitment, trust, and cohesion.

When I came to Danville, our Presbytery (our local ruling body) boasted 44 congregations with 33 full time pastors. We now number 32 congregations and 4 full time pastors. Last month we voted to stop using the term "Temporary Pastor" and instead list them as "Contracted Pastors," because these temporary pastors are rarely temporary. The church's future isn't persons like me.

Our son, visiting last week from Colorado to check up on his aging parents, taught me a new word: "Hiraeth." It's Welsh, pronounced, "Heer-eyeth." It suggests "a home-sickness, a deep longing and grief for a home to which you never can return, a deep grief for lost places of the past."

On March 25, 2020, I entered into my daily log book the CNN COVID count of 54,869 persons world-wide infected with COVID, with a reported 780 deaths from COVID in the United States. I scribbled that 400 ventilators were shipped to New York but 30,000 were needed.

On Christmas Eve, 2020, I recorded 326, 217 deaths from COVID in the USA. I wrote then how America is hungry, America is starving, and we had a President who preferred playing golf. That failed President played golf and sprayed his face with cosmetics while his people were neglected. Talk about dereliction. He preferred anarchy to solutions, never caring. A year later, the count amounted to 815,423. Christmas Eve 2021, the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols from King's College, Cambridge, was the first time in a century when the choir was unable to participate. Instead of attending Christmas Eve worship, we watched "It's a Wonderful Life." It's a quaint movie but hardly the same as a late night Candlelight Service with dear friends and shared tears.

My entry for December 31, 2023 mentions that it was a damp and gray day. 100,743,442 persons were reported as infected worldwide with 1,092,661 deaths from COVID in the USA. My final tracking of these numbers occurred on March 18, 2023, with USA 1,123,836 deaths. We walked our dog around the block. I lament all those family, friends, neighbors who were denied the decent eulogies they deserved.

As I serve these congregations today, their Hiraeth is apparent. But so is something else. Foolish me, I've begun to see a glimmer of a people starved for something beautiful, hungry for community, thirsting for trust and civility, kindness and manners (which some mistakenly call being 'woke'), reclaiming hope, reclaiming humanity, good news. I see a people fed up with the hasty violence and cruelty, tired of hollow lives. I see people rejecting the gloom and doom festered and fostered by angry people. I see these smaller congregations reaching out to each other with genuine amity, fellowship, and love, finding creative ways to worship (without guys like me) which brings meaning to their lives. I see persons saying yes to unknown possibilities. I see persons willing to say yes to what might be, what is meant to be rather than what was.

As a man of faith, I've learnt the error of wanting God on my terms. God help us there. What is to come won't be the church in which I was raised and served officially for 46 years, that's obvious. I won't see it – I'll be dead -- but we are being called, tugged, pushed toward something fuller in the imagination of God. These are chrysalis days. I believe our grandchildren will grow wings.