

A Year of
*P*racticing Hope



2026

Welcome to a Year of Practicing Hope

I was going to impress Julie and take her to a nice place for a meal. A fireplace. Cloth napkins. Free refills! It was Friday, with four options for the fish fry. In the fine print, the menu said: 'all fish fries include a choice of French fries--sweet potato fries--potato pancakes--coleslaw and rye bread.' Am I getting rye bread? Why the dashes and not commas?

I began thinking about a God of hope, one who is always placing commas in our lives with love. Commas slow us down. Commas build on all that is past. They clarify a move forward.

Our God is a God who holds the present lightly with love, always at work to increase love's reigning in Christ. Our God is a God of commas more than full stops. God is present with grace because God is among us with hope.

2026 is a year of practicing hope in the Northern Illinois-Wisconsin Area.

This devotional in your hands is to encourage your collective and personal practice of hope. I believe these are days to bear witness to God's aim for love and justice, days to innovate for the newness God is bringing, and days to invite others who seek a community with which to practice hope. Hope is not a product on a shelf, but a lived practice of grace as Christian community.

Thank you, all of you who had a hand in compiling, editing, writing, and helping us to voice hope. Matthew 18:20 reminds us that Jesus said, 'for where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.' As long as we have a relationship with Jesus Christ, we have a relationship with hope. Amplify the God of commas. I look forward to hearing your hope stories.



BISHOP DAN SCHWERIN
NORTHERN ILLINOIS-WISCONSIN EPISCOPAL AREA

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing that you may abound in hope in the power of the Holy Spirit.

-Romans 15:13 (CEB)



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Emmaus is the place we are befriended by hope not yet seen. The way Luke tells it, the pilgrims on the road to Emmaus said, 'but we had hoped he would be the one to redeem Israel.' Soon, in the unfolding, the risen Lord is revealed in the breaking of the bread. We hope not for what is seen, but for what God is revealing.

One of our superintendents told me after viewing their charge conference video, one church decided to add a committee! (This sounds painful, but very Methodist.) They added a committee to elicit and amplify hope sightings. Maybe your day held a few hope sightings.

Some of you may have seen me traveling with an old leather satchel. It's my walking around bag, big enough for a tablet, a bible, a Discipline and power cords. I bought it with two gratuities given to me on the same day about ten years ago. One Saturday morning I had a funeral for an infant. There was a heart-broken couple, their folks, and me at the cemetery beside a family plot. The prayer of commendation lifted hope that our life, in God's love, never ends.

After prayers and liturgy and a few words, I hopped in the car and raced to the next thing, a wedding. It was almost too much to bear, a funeral and wedding on the same day, but then I heard the same words in the scripture the next couple selected, 'love never ends.' Friends, that never ending love is not doled out, it is poured out, for all persons. I carry that old bag around to remember them, and that God's never-ending love is the source of our hope.

I am humbled and grateful to be in ministry with you, and to amplify God's love by practicing hope together.

BISHOP DAN SCHWERIN

NORTHERN ILLINOIS-WISCONSIN EPISCOPAL AREA

But not only that! We even take pride in our problems, because we know that trouble produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope. This hope doesn't put us to shame, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

-Romans 5:3-5, CEB

Let us pray:

*God of Emmaus and
God of the storm,
pour your love
into our days
that we may be
hope-bearers for you.
Amen.*

He said to me, "Human one, these bones are the entire house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope has perished. We are completely finished.' So now, prophesy and say to them, The Lord God proclaims: I'm opening your graves! I will raise you up from your graves, my people, and I will bring you to Israel's fertile land. You will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and raise you up from your graves, my people. I will put my breath in you, and you will live. I will plant you on your fertile land, and you will know that I am the Lord. I've spoken, and I will do it. This is what the Lord says."

-Ezekiel 37:11-14, CEB



When Hope Comes Unexpectedly

Anne Lamott is one of my favorite authors. She is a wonderfully earthy author. She is both reverent and irreverent at the same time. She seeks after holiness in the midst of life that is filled with pain, hurts, challenges, and joys. Every time I read her, I find myself laughing at her humor.

In reading Anne Lamott, I am reminded that God meets us where we are. Right here in the rough and tumble of life. Right here, in a world where we sometimes struggle with our parents or our children, or our jobs or the fact that our life has turned out different than we expected. God meets us right here, inviting us to trust God more with our life. God meets us right here, right where we need God the most.

In our passage from Ezekiel, God comes to the people of Israel when so many had given up hope, and God reminds them (and us) that God isn't finished with us yet. May we discover anew God's Spirit within, calling us forth to share love and hope where our world needs it the most.

REV. DR. SCOTT CARLSON

DIRECTOR OF CONGREGATIONAL DEVELOPMENT
WISCONSIN ANNUAL CONFERENCE

**Loving God,
Lead us into the future
you have designed for us.
Amen.**

Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It’s the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard it was the Lord, he wrapped his coat around himself (for he was naked) and jumped into the water.

-John 21:7, CEB

My family usually isn't one for beach vacations, but we splurged a few years ago and went to Aruba for a week. One of the highlights was a tour of the island that ended at a little cliff where people could jump into the Caribbean Sea. Some took flying leaps and others, tentative hops. One woman had a tough time of it, though. She would approach the cliff, look over and then go back. I wondered if she'd make it into the water.

In our faith lives, we talk about taking leaps of faith when we are uncertain of particular outcomes. But I also think we take leaps of hope, excited jumps into unknown futures but with glimpses of possibility. I think Peter takes a leap of hope into the water in this passage from John. There is a tone of assuredness in his voice, “It’s the Lord!” but I have to believe that there was at least a little bit of doubt before he leapt. After all, Peter was known for his denials. But he wasn't going to wait until they reached the shore. He leapt. In hope.

The woman on our tour was more creative and courageous than I gave her credit for. Rather than jumping off the cliff, she walked down a path and found a gentler way to enter the water. She still had to take a leap of sorts. She had to trust and take the hands of a couple of other people in order to make her way in, but she made it.

We all leap differently, but knowing the Lord's presence in our lives compels us to enter into the renewing waters of hope, whether we leap or hop.

REV. CHRISTIAN COON

DIRECTOR OF CONGREGATIONAL DEVELOPMENT
NORTHERN ILLINOIS CONFERENCE



Prayer

**God of new life and resurrection,
build up our courage so that we
can take leaps of hope, trusting
that you are there to welcome us
into your presence.**

Amen.





Hope That Prays for Enemies

"But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

-Matthew 5:44, NIV

Few things feel more unnatural than praying for an enemy. Everything in us resists it. Yet Jesus calls us to this unusual practice—not to excuse harm, but to keep our hearts open to the transforming power of God.

When we pray for our enemies, we declare a bold kind of hope: that people are not forever defined by their worst actions, that grace can reach further than hatred, and that God's future is larger than our divisions. It is a stubborn act of faith that believes reconciliation is possible—even if we cannot yet see it.

Praying for an enemy may not change them immediately, but it changes us. It loosens the grip of bitterness and makes space for God's Spirit to plant seeds of peace. Each prayer whispers: the story is not finished, and God's love is still at work.

To pray for an enemy is to hope in the God who raised Jesus from the dead, the God who brings life out of what looks like endings.

Today, who is hard for you to pray for?
Begin there. Whisper their name to God.
That simple act is a practice of hope.

**God of mercy, soften my heart where it has grown hard.
Teach me to see even my enemies as people loved by you.
Give me the courage to pray for them, and the hope to
trust that your grace is greater than any division. Amen.**

REV. DR. BRIAN GILBERT

PRAIRIE SOUTH DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT
NORTHERN ILLINOIS CONFERENCE

*Hope in the Lord!
Be strong!
Let your heart take courage!
Hope in the Lord!*

-Psalm 27:14, CEB

H

Hope is not passive. It is a muscle, a memory, a movement.

Perseverance is not just endurance—it is the sacred refusal to give up on God's promise, even when the empire presses in.

To practice hope and perseverance as a descendant of enslaved people is to remember those who survived the unspeakable. Their laughter, their songs, their whispered prayers in cotton fields and kitchens is my inheritance. Hope begins with remembrance. Perseverance begins with honoring their strength.

In these uncertain times—when benefits are cut, when racial profiling becomes law, when ICE targets immigrant communities, when truth-tellers are silenced—we must also refuse. Refuse systems that demand our silence. Refuse despair as the final word. Though slavery was abolished, its scaffolding remains. Racism and exclusion were not dismantled—they were repurposed. We feel their weight in policy and the quiet violence of neglect.

Jesus practiced hope and perseverance in the wilderness. He refused the temptations of empire, scarcity, and spectacle. He chose the long road of liberation. We are called to do the same. Dr. King reminds us: "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase."

Hope is Harriet Tubman's lantern.
Perseverance is Fannie Lou Hamer's song.

To practice hope and perseverance is to:

- **Reclaim** joy as resistance, Sabbath as sacred, our bodies as beloved.
- **Root** ourselves in Spirit, in community, in the soil that holds ancestral prayers.
- **Rise** together—not just in worship, but in organizing, mutual aid, and prophetic witness.

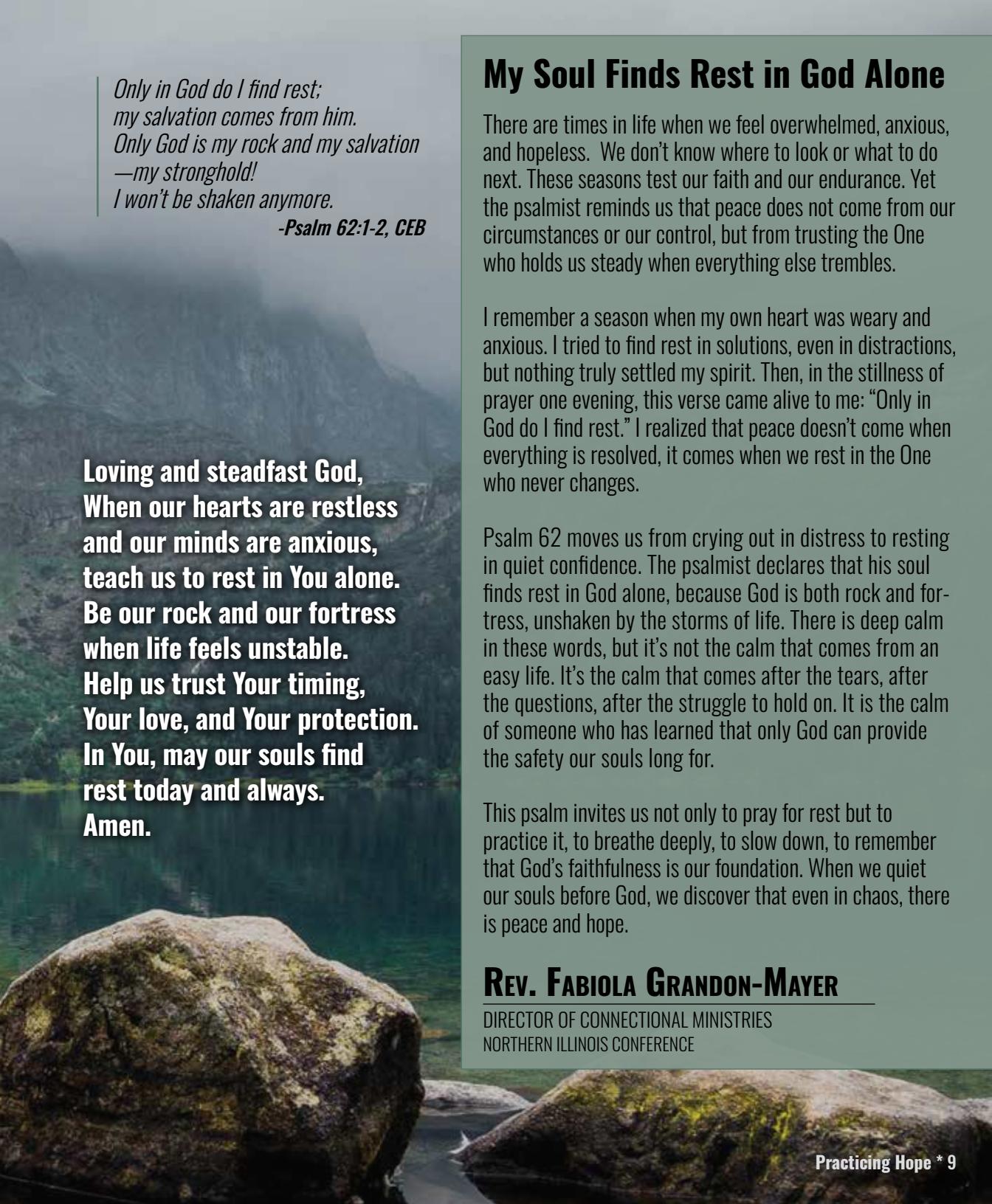
Hope is to believe in an oppression free beloved community even when the empire mocks it.

Perseverance is the sacred rhythm of those who dare to dream beyond what is.

**God of our ancestors,
Teach us to remember, to refuse, to reclaim.
When systems fail and silence threatens,
anchor us in Your liberating love.
Let us love boldly. Serve joyfully.
Lead courageously. And rise like morning light.
Amen.**

LISA JONES

LAY GENERAL CONFERENCE DELEGATE
WISCONSIN ANNUAL CONFERENCE



*Only in God do I find rest;
my salvation comes from him.
Only God is my rock and my salvation
—my stronghold!
I won't be shaken anymore.*

-Psalm 62:1-2, CEB

**Loving and steadfast God,
When our hearts are restless
and our minds are anxious,
teach us to rest in You alone.
Be our rock and our fortress
when life feels unstable.
Help us trust Your timing,
Your love, and Your protection.
In You, may our souls find
rest today and always.
Amen.**

My Soul Finds Rest in God Alone

There are times in life when we feel overwhelmed, anxious, and hopeless. We don't know where to look or what to do next. These seasons test our faith and our endurance. Yet the psalmist reminds us that peace does not come from our circumstances or our control, but from trusting the One who holds us steady when everything else trembles.

I remember a season when my own heart was weary and anxious. I tried to find rest in solutions, even in distractions, but nothing truly settled my spirit. Then, in the stillness of prayer one evening, this verse came alive to me: "Only in God do I find rest." I realized that peace doesn't come when everything is resolved, it comes when we rest in the One who never changes.

Psalm 62 moves us from crying out in distress to resting in quiet confidence. The psalmist declares that his soul finds rest in God alone, because God is both rock and fortress, unshaken by the storms of life. There is deep calm in these words, but it's not the calm that comes from an easy life. It's the calm that comes after the tears, after the questions, after the struggle to hold on. It is the calm of someone who has learned that only God can provide the safety our souls long for.

This psalm invites us not only to pray for rest but to practice it, to breathe deeply, to slow down, to remember that God's faithfulness is our foundation. When we quiet our souls before God, we discover that even in chaos, there is peace and hope.

REV. FABIOLA GRANDON-MAYER

DIRECTOR OF CONNECTIONAL MINISTRIES
NORTHERN ILLINOIS CONFERENCE

“Bravery is not the absence of fear but following God through the fear as you believe God’s promises. It’s holding on to the facts of our faith more tightly than to the fears for the future.” Kristen Strong

Throughout my ministry and work, I have sought ways to live into the love of Christ and to be that for those to whom I serve and to all God’s children. My interactions with people who struggle with addiction, poverty, trauma, homelessness, and betrayal have been through the lens of their pain. These are real and tangible struggles that leave places of brokenness and hopelessness. My role as a Christian and a clergyperson has been to be a hope-holder when hope seemed absent.

I recall a time when a woman shared with me that to hope was too much of a burden and she could not bear to hope. I shared with her that one of the pillars of resiliency is hope and that while she may not have it, I do. I will share what I have and when you are able to, once again, I will gladly hand it back. Allow me to walk with you in these moments.

We are reminded about bravery by Kristen Strong, it is holding on to the facts of our faith, Christ’s love. It is through our love that we bear witness to hope, becoming the bearers and holders of hope in a world desperate for connection.

*You are one body and one spirit,
just as God also called you in one hope.
-Ephesians 4:4, CEB*

P

ray

**God of faithful love,
May we live into your
call to walk with
each other in
hope and mercy.
Amen.**

REV. BARBARA CERTA-WARNER

ASSISTANT TO THE BISHOP
WISCONSIN ANNUAL CONFERENCE

*For this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says.
"Houses, fields and vineyards will again be bought in this land."*

-Jeremiah 32:15, NIV

You know the story. We are about to be conquered. Land is worthless. There is no hope. Our worthless nephew invokes his legal right to mortgage his farm and make us pay it off. Jeremiah knows this is the word of the Lord, so he buys the land. He knows we are bound for Exile, and he will never live to work the land, enjoy its harvest or its sanctuary. He is thrown in jail trying to perform the home inspection.

Our text is his instruction to his friend, his parishioner, his Trustee chair. God says to preserve this document. The day is coming when God will supernaturally restore the covenant God made and we broke. Hope? You can literally take that to the bank.

I was called to turnaround church. My nephews have sold me overpriced mortgages. Somewhere along the way I realized that we inherit the favor of God on the faithful who came before and live on the prayers that they vowed to pray for the church they loved. There is capital in our land, our buildings and our gatherings that the market cannot see. So we buy the land.

Sometimes we have the privilege of seeing a harvest, resting our head in peace. But if we know we never will, we still buy the land, because the Lord Almighty has promised. We, the Jeremiahs of the UMC are the human redeemers, banking on the promise of our Redeemer. Go walk the land of your church or ministry site and pray with me...

REV. JIM BELL

FIRST UMC, BELVIDERE, IL
NORTHERN ILLINOIS CONFERENCE



Lord Almighty, in this place?

**Does your promise
hold in this place?
Will new life spring
forth in this place?
Then let this be my place,
and me your servant,
in Jesus' name. Amen.**

*For in this hope, we were saved.
But hope that is seen is no hope at all.
Who hopes for what he already has?
But if we hope for what we do not yet have,
we wait for it patiently.*

-Romans 8:24-25, NIV

Practicing hope means choosing to believe God is working even when the evidence hasn't arrived yet. It means holding onto God's promises instead of fears. In the moments where we don't see change, God is still moving. In the silence, he is still speaking. He is still directing my steps, because God is faithful, hoping is never wasted.

There are many times I ask myself, "what if things do not work out?" I become tense and anxious, and then I pray and know that God is always with me. I am not alone; God will never leave my side.

I choose, trusting that God is already in my future, already at work in the unseen, already shaping the outcome in ways I can't yet understand. Even if I cannot see the evidence yet, I believe that God's promises are stronger, truer, and more enduring than any fear I face.

TINA COTTRELL

ONEIDA UMC, DE PERE, WI
WISCONSIN ANNUAL CONFERENCE



Lord,

**Teach me to hope in what I cannot see.
When my heart grows weary, remind
me that Your promises are sure and
Your timing is perfect. Strengthen me
to trust You in waiting, to rest in Your
faithfulness, and to look forward with
confidence. Fill me with the hope
that comes from knowing You are
not finished with my story.
Amen.**



*I can do all things through Christ
which strengtheneth me.*

-Philippians 4:13, KJV

When I was in second grade, a very, very long time ago, I told my Grade School's Santa, when he was going around to all the classes and each child had to sit on his lap and tell him what they wanted for Christmas, that I wanted a Bible. I told him that because I knew I was getting a Bible for Christmas.

To my surprise, some time later that afternoon, he came back and gave me a Gideon Bible, the very first Bible I ever owned. I have that Bible to this day and one of the verses underlined in it is Philippians 4:13, one of my favorite and guiding light verses since I first read it and memorized it as a child.

It is a promise that has brought me hope because I have always known since I was a child that the living Christ is always with me strengthening me for whatever life has or will put before me. It is a verse that I have prayer-repeated in tough times, and praise-repeated in times of thanksgiving.

**Lord God,
We give you thanks that you are
ever present in our lives, guiding,
protecting, and loving us always.
Amen.**

RANDY HAYES

NIC ANNUAL CONFERENCE SECRETARY
NORTHERN ILLINOIS CONFERENCE

It was winter, and I was a freshman in college. I was studying science at a Lutheran-affiliated school. But physics and calculus and FORTRAN weren't what challenged me.

Faith is the reality of what we hope for, the proof of what we don't see.

-Hebrews 11:1, CEB

Prayer

**In the icy void
of human doubt,
may I reflect the
light, love, and
hope of Christ
so others might
see the path.
Amen**

No, it was the humanities class. Alongside Shakespeare and Voltaire, we read the Bible historically and critically as if it were just another work of literature or philosophy. For the first time, I grappled with the tension between the Bible as human creation, and the Bible as the word of God. Simultaneously, I wrestled with my faith. Was this stuff real? Did I believe in God? Did God know I existed?

One dark night I was walking across campus in a frosty fog. Buildings and trees disappeared in the indistinct darkness. I met no other people. No noises of the world intruded. I walked alone through the void. Only the path ahead of me was clear, lit by the occasional lamppost, bright globes of light in the icy haze.

Somewhere on that cold journey, I realized that I really did have faith. I didn't read something that convinced me (although I have since read much that bolsters my faith). I didn't logic my way to faith (although I have since thought much and rationally). I didn't see a flashing neon sign (although God has since acted explicitly in my life).

The moment was just a quiet, blessed assurance that, yes – God exists, and yes – Jesus loves me. In a cold and dark world, I experienced a warm spark of faith. That glowing ember has carried me for decades since.

I see proof of God's reign on earth because I see, by faith, what others ignore or take for granted. I practice hope because I know, by faith, that my hope is a reality.

REV. M. PARK HUNTER

NORTH EAST DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT
WISCONSIN ANNUAL CONFERENCE

Practicing Hope in Times of Waiting

I hope, Lord. My whole being hopes, and I wait for God's promise.

My whole being waits for my Lord – more than the night watch waits for morning; yes, more than the night watch waits for morning!

-Psalm 130:5-6, CEB

Waiting can be difficult. Especially when waiting for medical test results, either for myself or someone I've loved.

One specific night that I recall seemed as though it would never end. I was expecting test results the next morning, and the night brought discomfort and lots of anxiety. I was a complete mess.

Psalm 130:5-6 teaches us to examine the way in which we wait. Do we wait with anxiety, trying to control the situation? Or do we wait with hope and trust, letting God do the work? Needless to say, I've been working on my hope and trust since this extremely restless night years ago. What I've learned is that I can't will the results I want into existence. God is in charge, not me. So rather than waiting anxiously, I'm trying to wait with the hope and faith that God has it all under control.

In times of uncertainty, Psalm 130:5-6 urges us to adopt the personality of the watchman: hopeful and patient. And in the meantime, God is with us in the night, guiding us toward the morning. The emphasis for 2026 is practicing hope. What a perfect time for me to do just that!

JODI SPURLING

FIRST UMC, OTTAWA, IL
NORTHERN ILLINOIS CONFERENCE

All three of these concepts (faith, hope and love) are important. We so often hear this verse used in weddings on how important love is. Who can fault that? But obviously, hope is crucial as well.

In 1976, I attended Regent College in Vancouver and read the book *The Blessed Hope* by George Ladd. Eschatology was huge in the 70's; not so much now. The life changing concept for me was Ladd's belief that it "is the Lord who is the object of our [future] hope; and whether His coming be near or far, the glorious fact of His person and the certainty of our union with Him is the ground and incentive for our holy walk." Jesus is our Blessed Hope.

Why is hope so important?

Because life can be so difficult! You and I can list the many ways this bears out in our lives.

Hope sustains me. It shapes my beliefs about difficult circumstances as well as death. Many friends and family have left this earth and are now in heaven with Jesus. The joy I have that my mom is up in heaven with Jesus right now, just worshiping at Jesus' feet absolutely thrills me. I have the hope that I will be able to join her and others singing. I don't have to fear death. I don't have to be discouraged at life's troubles.

Mom and I would often sing, "It will be worth it all, when we see Jesus, life's trials will seem so small, when we see Christ. One glimpse of His dear face, all sorrow will erase, so bravely run the race, till we see Christ."

That is the hope I'm talking about.

DEB PATTEE

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR EMERITUS, UW-EC
WISCONSIN ANNUAL CONFERENCE

*Now faith, hope, and love remain—
these three things—
and the greatest of these is love.*

-1 Corinthians 13:13, CEB

Lord Jesus,

**Thank you for dying for
me and forgiving me for
all my sin and telling me
in John 14:3 that if I go
and prepare a place for
you, I will come again and
receive you unto myself,
that where I am,
there you may be also.
Amen.**



Practicing Hope in the Face of Fear

It is my expectation and hope that I won't be put to shame in anything. Rather, I hope with daring courage that Christ's greatness will be seen in my body, now as always, whether I live or die.

-Philippians 1:20, CEB

Fear has a way of silencing hope. The fear of shame, harm, or suffering can keep us from acting on the faith we profess. I know that was true for me. Until one May afternoon several years ago when I met some of the bravest, most hopeful people I've ever known: a group of Latinx construction workers who walked off the job to protest unsafe conditions and stolen wages.

Their faces told the story. They were nervous, uncertain, yet radiant with a kind of courage that could only come from hope. They didn't know how their protest would end, but they believed that dignity was worth the risk. That day, I saw the courage of Christ alive in them.

Since then, I've come to see that practicing hope isn't passive. It's an act of holy defiance. It's choosing to live as if God's justice and mercy are already on the move. And when we take those risks, Christ's greatness shines through us, too.

**God of daring hope,
Give us courage when fear whispers "stay quiet."
Give us vision when despair says "give up."
And let your greatness be seen in us
in our words, our actions, and our love
so that hope may prevail. Amen.**

REV. ROB HAMILTON

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH OF GENEVA, IL
NORTHERN ILLINOIS CONFERENCE

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Psalm 25:5 reminds us that hope is rooted in God's guidance. True hope does not depend on circumstances, achievements, or our own plans. It grows when we trust God, let Him lead, and allow Him to teach and shape our hearts. In a world full of uncertainties and pressures, God calls us to place our confidence in Him and His perfect timing.

I have experienced this personally. I grew up in a Methodist family, and my parents taught my two brothers and me to hold firmly to our faith and seek God in every decision. In college, I had clear goals: graduate, get a job, and support my family. I thought I knew exactly the path I wanted.

But in my second year, God called me into ministry. I began teaching children, leading the choir, and playing the piano every Sunday. At first, I enjoyed it and thought it was temporary. After graduation, I tried to follow my own plans, but God kept closing every door. He wanted me to continue serving in His ministry in my home church in the Philippines for twelve years.

Many nights I cried, asking, "Lord, why me? Why can't I follow my plans?" Even when I expressed my frustrations and desires, I knew that God is the only One who listens to my heart with understanding and love. One afternoon, after cleaning the church, I sat at the altar and prayed, "Lord, I surrender everything. I put my trust and my hope in You because You are God and You are my God. Help me change my heart and accept Your ways."

As I walked with God, allowing Him to lead me in truth and placing my trust and hope in Him, He opened new doors. After thirteen years in ministry, God gave us the opportunity to serve in the United States. My husband applied and passed. I was not overly expectant so I could guard my heart and not feel hurt. I prayed, "Lord, may Your guidance reach our hearts and Your ways be seen in our eyes. I put my trust and hope in You. Lead us in how we can serve You faithfully in our lives."

Through this surrender, I discovered that hope grows as God leads and teaches me. Even when I cannot see the full path, His guidance directs my steps, His lessons shape my heart, and His faithfulness reminds me to trust. True hope flourishes as I follow His lead, obey His teaching, and rely on Him completely.

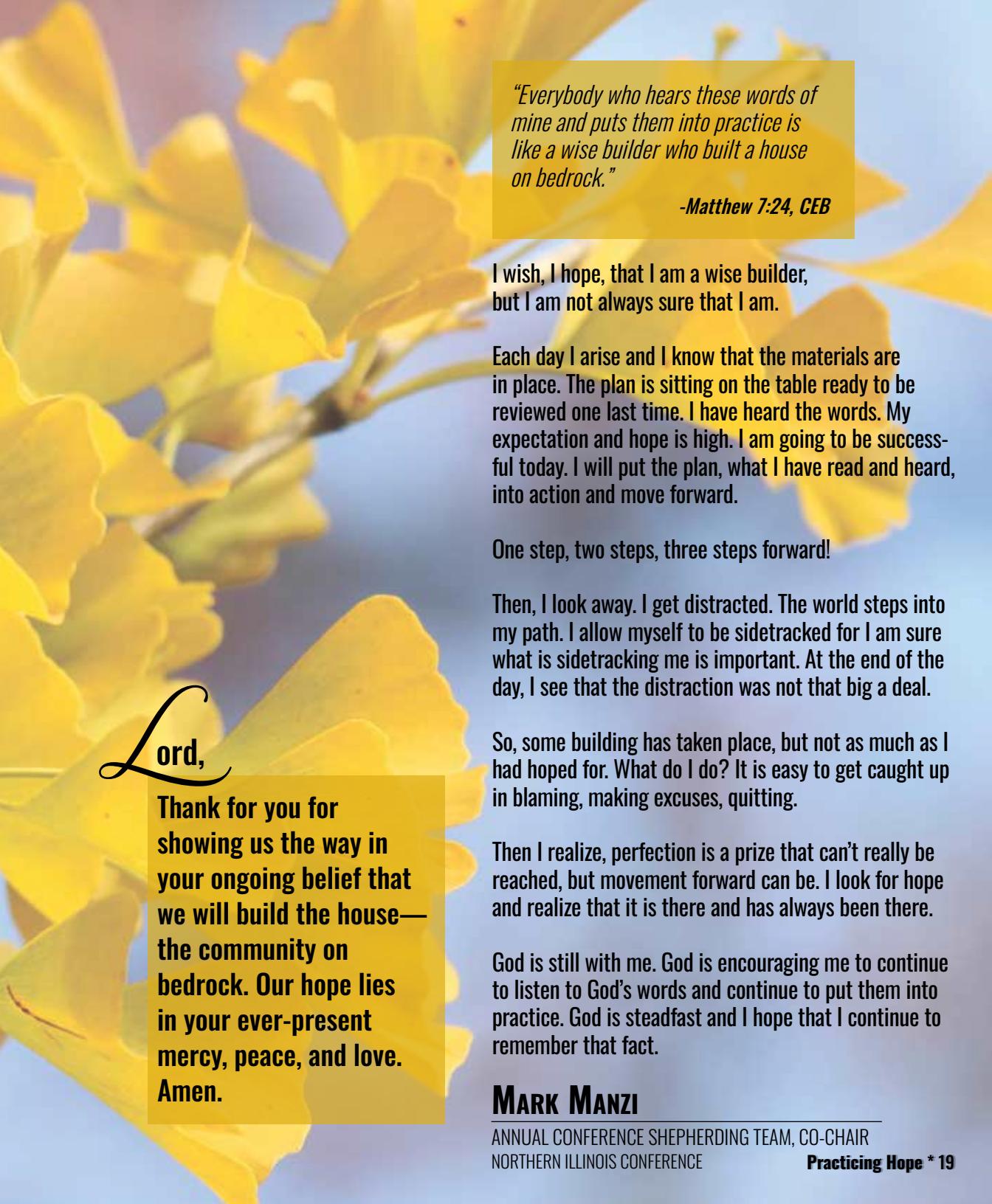
*Lead me in your truth
and teach me,
because you are the
God who saves me.
I put my hope in you
all day long.*

-Psalm 25:5, CEB

**Lord Jesus,
Thank you for dying for me and
forgiving me for all my sin and
telling me in John 14:3 that if
I go and prepare a place for you,
I will come again and receive
you unto myself, that where
I am, there you may be also.
Amen.**

DIANA ROSE FERRER

VIOLA UMC, WI
WISCONSIN ANNUAL CONFERENCE



“Everybody who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise builder who built a house on bedrock.”

-Matthew 7:24, CEB

I wish, I hope, that I am a wise builder, but I am not always sure that I am.

Each day I arise and I know that the materials are in place. The plan is sitting on the table ready to be reviewed one last time. I have heard the words. My expectation and hope is high. I am going to be successful today. I will put the plan, what I have read and heard, into action and move forward.

One step, two steps, three steps forward!

Then, I look away. I get distracted. The world steps into my path. I allow myself to be sidetracked for I am sure what is sidetracking me is important. At the end of the day, I see that the distraction was not that big a deal.

So, some building has taken place, but not as much as I had hoped for. What do I do? It is easy to get caught up in blaming, making excuses, quitting.

Then I realize, perfection is a prize that can't really be reached, but movement forward can be. I look for hope and realize that it is there and has always been there.

God is still with me. God is encouraging me to continue to listen to God's words and continue to put them into practice. God is steadfast and I hope that I continue to remember that fact.

MARK MANZI

ANNUAL CONFERENCE SHEPHERDING TEAM, CO-CHAIR
NORTHERN ILLINOIS CONFERENCE

Practicing Hope * 19

Lord,

Thank for you for showing us the way in your ongoing belief that we will build the house—the community on bedrock. Our hope lies in your ever-present mercy, peace, and love. Amen.

*P*racticing Hope in Every Home

Your statutes have been my songs of praise wherever I lived as an immigrant. Lord, I remember your name at nighttime, and I keep your Instruction. This has been my practice because I guard your precepts.

-Psalm 119:54–56, CEB

**Faithful God,
Thank you for holding
me through every
season. Teach me to
practice hope wherever
I dwell. Let Your Word
be my song, Your name
my comfort, and Your
purpose my guide.
From every earthly
home to my eternal one,
may I walk in hope.
In Jesus' name, Amen.**

I was born homeless in Guatemala City and brought to the United States at age ten—Elsa, Texas to be exact. Before arriving, I spent nine months in a remote village in Northern Mexico.

That season was marked by fear, loneliness, and uncertainty. I didn't yet know Jesus, but I clung to a quiet hope that something greater was guiding me. Some might call it resilience. Now, I know it was the Lord preparing me for His purpose.

Today, as a deaconess and pastor's wife, I've made homes in many cities—from Texas to Wisconsin. Ministry has taken us across the country, but through every move and transition, one thing has remained: my dependence on God and the practice of hope.

Psalm 119 reminds us that God's statutes can be our songs wherever we dwell. That has been my reality. Whether in Guatemala, a dusty village, or a parsonage, God's Word has been my light. I've remembered His name in the night—through tears, whispered prayers, and quiet trust.

Hope is not passive. It's active obedience, even when the future is unclear. It's believing that God's instruction is not just a rule—it's a compass pointing us toward the eternal home He's prepared for us.

Practicing hope has shaped my life. It's how I've endured the broken immigration system, embraced ministry, motherhood, and leadership. It's how I've welcomed each new beginning with faith that God's end goal is good. From being born without a home to being promised an eternal one, my life is a testimony to God's faithfulness and the power of hope.

DEACONESS HEIDI J. CAREAGA

DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR AND LODI UMC, WI
WISCONSIN ANNUAL CONFERENCE



*So, since we have such hope,
we act with great confidence.*

-2 Corinthians 3:12, CEB

As I read this scripture, I thought of what troubled waters I faced seven years ago. I scheduled my yearly mammogram and my doctor suggested I get another one that was more comprehensive.

Upon receiving the results, I heard the words no one wants to hear, "you have cancer." What am I am to do? Thinking I was in "good shape" this was a total shock to me.

The first thing I did was pray and then went home and told my husband and children.

Hope was next on my agenda. I had to believe I was not in a hopeless situation for I do have courage and strength in me. The Lord provides and is a miracle worker. I know that God would provide for me at this time in my life. Hope is what I had.

My ancestors treasured troubled water with hope in their hearts, and souls, and I had to have hope the Lord would see me through this traumatic occasion in my life.

I did have breast surgery and radiation, and can now say, "I am cancer free!"

Hope. I believed it, and hope delivered a positive outcome for me. Praise the Lord!

Most Loving God, Magnificent One, Maker of Heaven and Earth, I thank you for the many blessings of yesterday, today and tomorrow. You bring hope through my trials and tribulations. Your grace and mercy sustain me as I do your will, to the best of my ability every day. I may not be all that I can be, but thank you, I am not what I used to be, for you brought light into my darkness. I am a survivor. Grateful I am. For this I give you all glory and honor. Amen.

RITA L. SMITH
CONFERENCE COMMISSION ON THE STATUS
& ROLE OF WOMEN CHAIR
NORTHERN ILLINOIS CONFERENCE

We may all have found it not easy to shine hope, especially when we go through dark and cold seasons, even doubting whether we have hope to reflect on our faces. I recall sitting in an old used car on a heavy rainy night by a big river, feeling utterly without hope. I'm glad I changed my mind that night and believed that my life wasn't solely in my hand, but still being molded by God's hand.

I've learned that I can be hopeful not because my life will turn out as wished (that's optimism), but because I trust that God's will be fulfilled in my life—that's true, unwavering hope.

It's this deeper conviction that others recognize. I remember a friend observing that hope in me and saying, "If it's your faith that keeps you looking filled with hope, I'd like to know more about your God. And there's another person who made me feel the same way. I'd like to let the two of you meet." The woman that friend introduced me to later became my wife, and soon after, that friend found hope in God, too.

Truly, this is what I want to witness among my fellow United Methodists. We might feel we have plenty of reasons to be concerned and worried about the future, but we have the most profound, un-take-away-able reason to be hopeful: Christ is the Lord of our individual lives and the life of our churches. Our hope is not grounded on our circumstances or capabilities, but on our faithful God.

I am hopeful. I might not be able to say it if my hope were about bringing back the "hay days" of our churches. I'm hopeful because Christ is the Lord of the life of our churches, actively writing our new stories. Perhaps our question must be whether we seek it and are inquiring about it. Good news, liberating and hope-accelerating, is that hope is not something we must muster up; it is something we can live and practice, first by recognizing Christ's presence in the present moment.

REV. PYUNGAHN "PEACE" KIM

NORTH WEST DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT
WISCONSIN ANNUAL CONFERENCE

You must worship Christ as Lord of your life. And if someone asks about your hope as a believer, always be ready to explain it.

-1 Peter 3:15, NLT

Lord,

Our reason for unwavering hope, thank you for being the foundation beneath our feet. May we know your presence this day that frees us from the burden of trying to generate our own hope, as you write new stories in our midst and provide for us so we can be ready and eager to explain why we are hopeful. Amen.

Living *Hope* in a Wounded World

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

-1 Peter 1:3, CEB

Today, life is not easy. We live in a world where power, greed, money, and falsehood dominate. A nation built on liberty and law feels strained; hate and selfishness seem to prevail. For immigrants like me, who have lived under dictatorship on both extremes, this season awakens old fears. When I finally found sanctuary, the shadows of the past seemed gone—yet sometimes they reappear, and darkness feels near for my family, neighbors, and community.

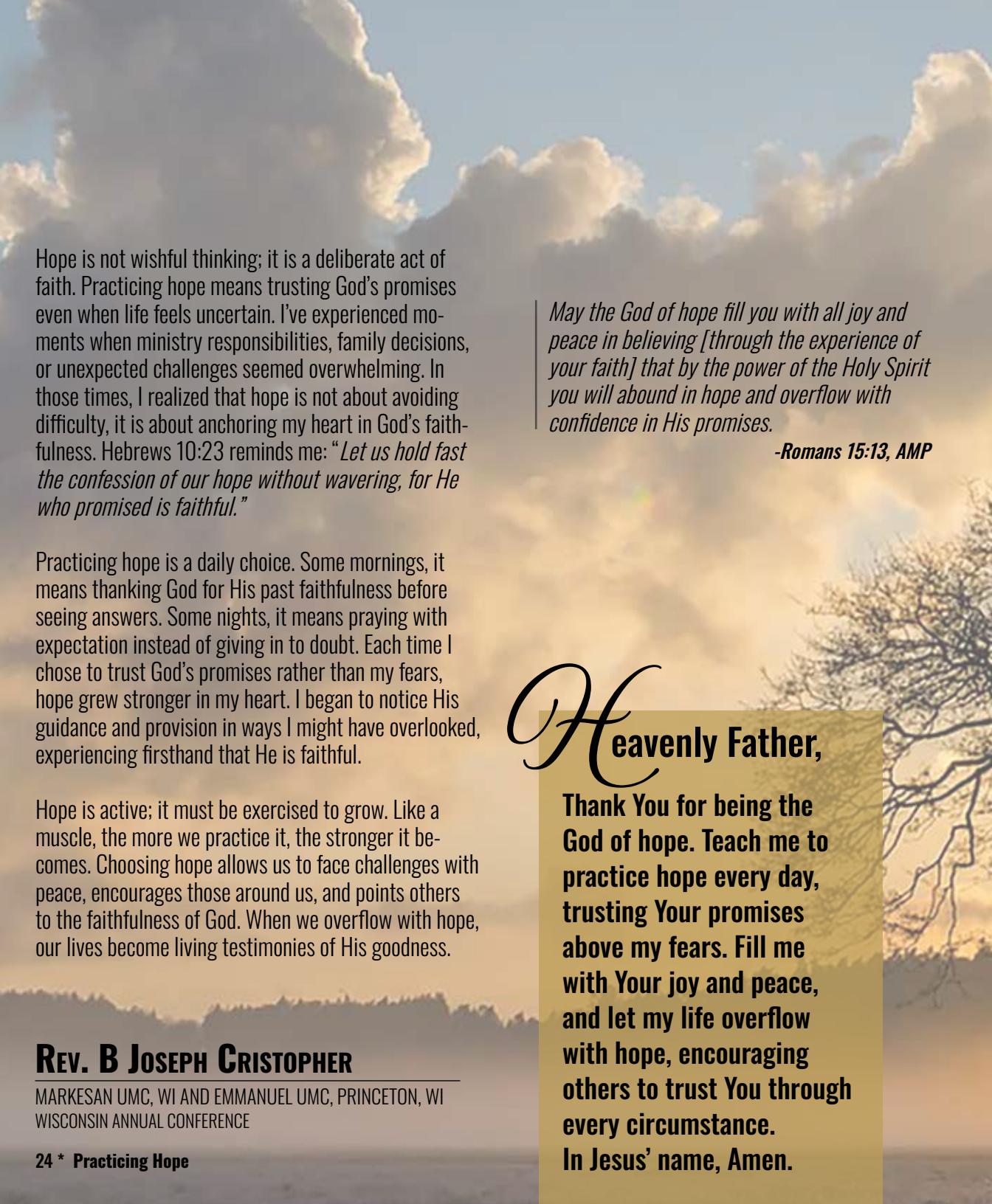
Even in those moments, hope rises. Hope in the presence of the living God becomes strength to continue. As 1 Peter reminds us, God gives us a living hope through the resurrection of Christ—not a fragile optimism, but a hope rooted in divine promise. This hope provides grace; it brings joy, peace, and love. The hope we receive through Jesus Christ sustains us when our strength fails and assures us that light remains at the end of every tunnel.

As the hymn reminds us, we have hope because Christ entered our world, walks with us in our struggles, and renews creation; therefore, we trust that light will overcome darkness and a new day will come (“Tene-mos Esperanza” — “That Is Why We Have Hope”; text by Federico J. Pagura; music by Homero R. Perera).

PASTOR LINO ARAGON

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH OF LIBERTYVILLE, IL
NORTHERN ILLINOIS CONFERENCE

**God of living hope,
When fear and darkness
surround us, remind us of
your presence and promises.
Strengthen our faith, fill us
with your peace, and sustain
us with the hope we have
in Jesus Christ. Guide us to
live as people of light in a
wounded world.
Amen.**



Hope is not wishful thinking; it is a deliberate act of faith. Practicing hope means trusting God's promises even when life feels uncertain. I've experienced moments when ministry responsibilities, family decisions, or unexpected challenges seemed overwhelming. In those times, I realized that hope is not about avoiding difficulty, it is about anchoring my heart in God's faithfulness. Hebrews 10:23 reminds me: *"Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful."*

Practicing hope is a daily choice. Some mornings, it means thanking God for His past faithfulness before seeing answers. Some nights, it means praying with expectation instead of giving in to doubt. Each time I chose to trust God's promises rather than my fears, hope grew stronger in my heart. I began to notice His guidance and provision in ways I might have overlooked, experiencing firsthand that He is faithful.

Hope is active; it must be exercised to grow. Like a muscle, the more we practice it, the stronger it becomes. Choosing hope allows us to face challenges with peace, encourages those around us, and points others to the faithfulness of God. When we overflow with hope, our lives become living testimonies of His goodness.

REV. B JOSEPH CRISTOPHER

MARKESAN UMC, WI AND EMMANUEL UMC, PRINCETON, WI
WISCONSIN ANNUAL CONFERENCE

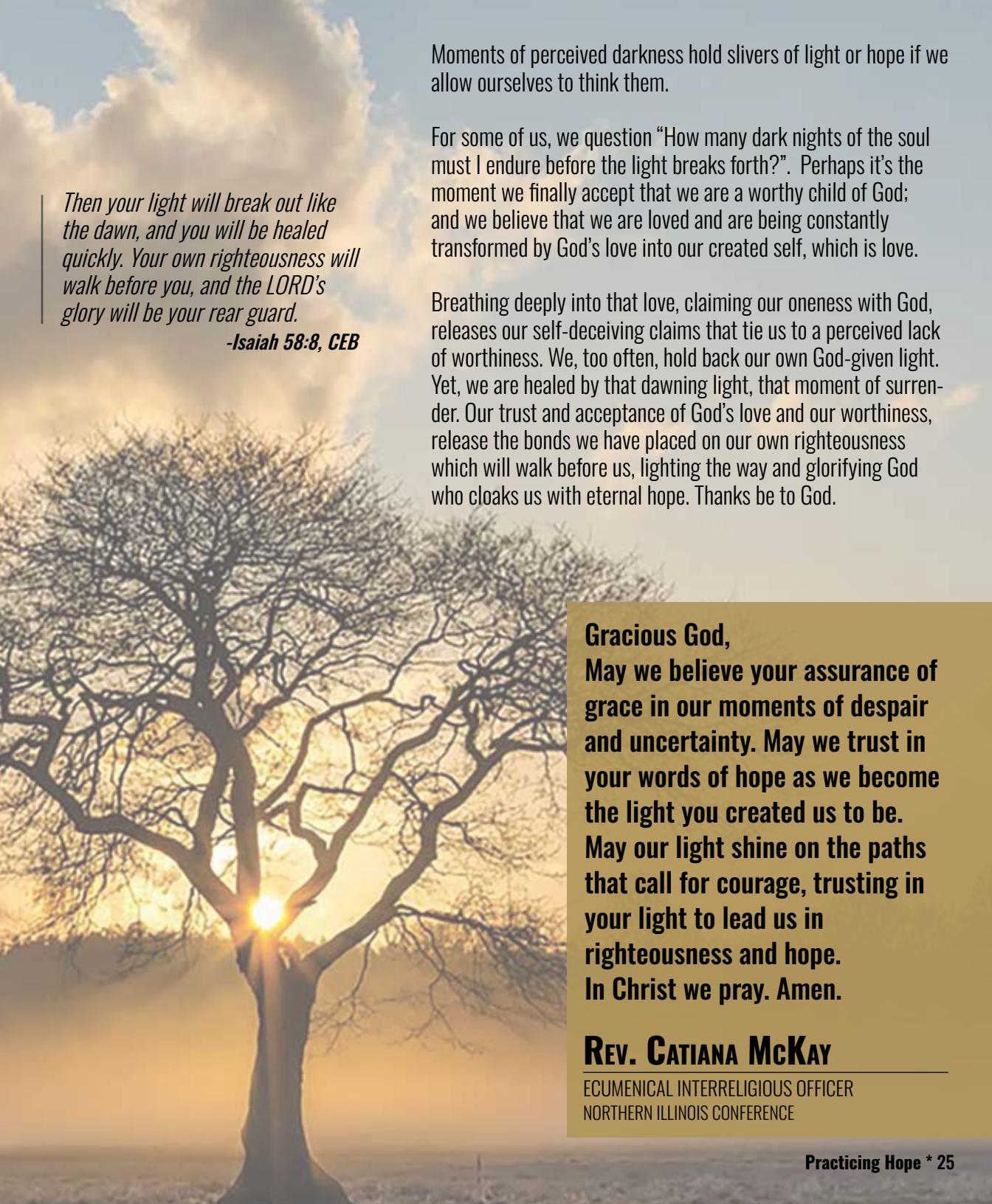
May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing [through the experience of your faith] that by the power of the Holy Spirit you will abound in hope and overflow with confidence in His promises.

-Romans 15:13, AMP

H

eavenly Father,

Thank You for being the God of hope. Teach me to practice hope every day, trusting Your promises above my fears. Fill me with Your joy and peace, and let my life overflow with hope, encouraging others to trust You through every circumstance. In Jesus' name, Amen.



Then your light will break out like the dawn, and you will be healed quickly. Your own righteousness will walk before you, and the LORD's glory will be your rear guard.

-Isaiah 58:8, CEB

Moments of perceived darkness hold slivers of light or hope if we allow ourselves to think them.

For some of us, we question “How many dark nights of the soul must I endure before the light breaks forth?”. Perhaps it’s the moment we finally accept that we are a worthy child of God; and we believe that we are loved and are being constantly transformed by God’s love into our created self, which is love.

Breathing deeply into that love, claiming our oneness with God, releases our self-deceiving claims that tie us to a perceived lack of worthiness. We, too often, hold back our own God-given light. Yet, we are healed by that dawning light, that moment of surrender. Our trust and acceptance of God’s love and our worthiness, release the bonds we have placed on our own righteousness which will walk before us, lighting the way and glorifying God who cloaks us with eternal hope. Thanks be to God.

**Gracious God,
May we believe your assurance of
grace in our moments of despair
and uncertainty. May we trust in
your words of hope as we become
the light you created us to be.
May our light shine on the paths
that call for courage, trusting in
your light to lead us in
righteousness and hope.
In Christ we pray. Amen.**

REV. CATIANA MCKAY

ECUMENICAL INTERRELIGIOUS OFFICER
NORTHERN ILLINOIS CONFERENCE

I believe that the present suffering is nothing compared to the coming glory that is going to be revealed to us.

-Romans 8:18, NIV

*Father God,
Thank You for the
promise that my
current sufferings
cannot compare to
the glory that You
are preparing for
me. Father, help
me practice hope
each day by trusting
in Your character
and Your timing.
Strengthen my
heart, steady my
mind, and remind
me that You are
in control and
working in every
season of my life.
In Jesus' name,
Amen.*

Hope is not just a feeling that you experience when life is easy; it is something that you practice. Paul writes Romans 8:18 from a place of suffering, yet his words are anchored in a deep confidence in the Lord: what God is doing in us and for us is far greater than what we're going through right now. Practicing hope means choosing to look beyond what we see today and fixing our eyes on the promises of God.

Just like building physical strength through repetition and resistance, spiritual hope is strengthened through the challenges that you face in your life. Every trial that you encounter becomes a training ground for your trust in God to grow deeper. Instead of allowing difficult obstacles to weaken you, practicing hope will turn your suffering into spiritual endurance.

This would look like small daily choices. For example, choosing prayer over panic, choosing worship when you feel discouraged, or choosing gratitude when life feels uncertain. It means believing that God is working in ways you cannot see, especially in situations that haven't changed even when you've prayed about them. Hope is not ignoring reality; it's choosing to see reality through God's faithfulness.

Whatever challenge you're going through today, know that Romans 8:18 calls us to lift our eyes to the Lord and remember that He is not finished. He is shaping, strengthening, and preparing you for something far greater than you could imagine. Practicing hope keeps your hearts steady and your faith alive as you wait on His perfect timing.

DEACONESS KADY HERR-YANG

CHRISTWAY UMC, MILWAUKEE, WI
WISCONSIN ANNUAL CONFERENCE

Gracious God,

When we seek your face in the wee hours of the morning, while it is yet dark, and all is quiet, we pray that you would bless us with the assurance of your presence. Help us to believe that you are able to protect and provide for us and our neighbors; that you will do what you've always done and be our liberator; that you will love us unconditionally and use us to be a help to our brothers and sisters. In your name we pray, Amen.

Early in the morning of the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb.

-John 20:1, CEB

There are so many wonderful points to this scripture that help us to understand how to remain hopeful.

Early in the morning, before the sun rises, is one of the best times of the day to seek the presence of God. It is the time when the sun crests over the horizon; the time before the children have risen; the dog is still sleeping, and the cars outside driving by are far and few between.

Only the birds can be heard, provided the windows are open, and their song adds to the practice of God's presence as if they, too, are seeking God. To do this at the start of one's week is a great way to acknowledge that God is our sustainer and pray for guidance and protection for each day that comes.

Mary Magdalene, the one who was forgiven much, one of the few women to be named as a disciple, is there at the tomb, where they laid him, looking for Jesus. And Jesus is not there. Mary has some choices. She can assume the worst and believe he has been stolen. Or she can be filled with hope, and do as Jesus encouraged her to do, believe that he is alive.

In this season of uncertainty and challenging times, we too should be seeking the Lord in the wee hours of the morning with hope-- praying for protection over our loved ones and community, for our nation and the world. And even though we cannot see Jesus, we should know that Immanuel, God, is still with us.

DR. TINA SHELTON

COMMITTEE ON DISCIPLESHIP AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION
NORTHERN ILLINOIS CONFERENCE

I Know the Plans I Have for You

I know the plans I have in mind for you, declares the LORD; they are plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a future filled with hope.

-Jeremiah 29:11, CEB

My Aunt Barbara was widowed when she was in her 50s, this was the verse that she clung to through the worst of her grief. Many have similar stories about Jeremiah 29:11, which may be the most familiar verse in all Jeremiah. This is appropriate, but in its original context it's a little more complicated than that.

Jeremiah wrote these words in a letter to Jewish exiles in Babylon. In 597 BCE, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had captured Jerusalem. He did not destroy the city at that time, but he took their young king and most of the upper class of the city into captivity, leaving the king's uncle in Jerusalem to rule as Babylon's vassal. Another who stayed in Jerusalem was the prophet Jeremiah.

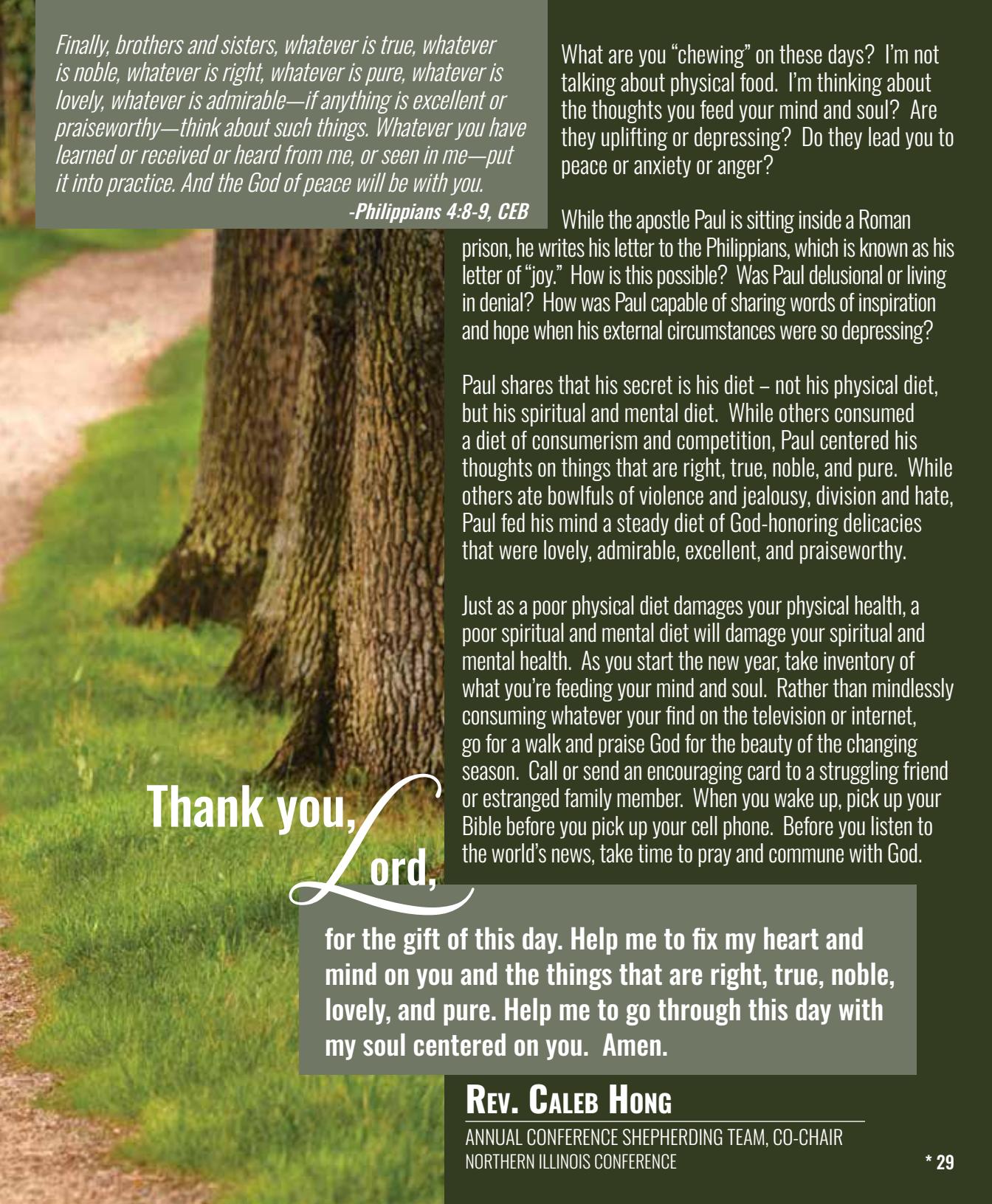
Within a few years after this exile, prophets among the exiles began promising that the captivity would be brief. God was about to return the exiles to Jerusalem. Jeremiah disagreed, and so he wrote this letter, saying, When Babylon's seventy years are up, I will come and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. (29:9-10). In other words, Jeremiah's message to the exiles was: "Yes, God will return his people to their land, but none of you will live to see it. Your job now is live your lives faithfully in exile, so that your children will be looking for God when God is ready to move."

The exiles didn't accept Jeremiah's words, and we might not have either. We, too, tend to focus on immediate goals, looking for God to work, but expecting it to happen on our schedule. But God isn't bound to our five-year plans. God's promises can be trusted, but not scheduled.

*God,
Thank you for your
promises, even the ones
I will never see fulfilled
myself. In the meantime,
give me the strength
to build faithfully
where I am.
Amen.*

REV. JERRY MORRIS

LAKE STREET UMC, EAU CLAIRE, WI
WISCONSIN ANNUAL CONFERENCE



Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

-Philippians 4:8-9, CEB

What are you “chewing” on these days? I’m not talking about physical food. I’m thinking about the thoughts you feed your mind and soul? Are they uplifting or depressing? Do they lead you to peace or anxiety or anger?

While the apostle Paul is sitting inside a Roman prison, he writes his letter to the Philippians, which is known as his letter of “joy.” How is this possible? Was Paul delusional or living in denial? How was Paul capable of sharing words of inspiration and hope when his external circumstances were so depressing?

Paul shares that his secret is his diet – not his physical diet, but his spiritual and mental diet. While others consumed a diet of consumerism and competition, Paul centered his thoughts on things that are right, true, noble, and pure. While others ate bowlfuls of violence and jealousy, division and hate, Paul fed his mind a steady diet of God-honoring delicacies that were lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy.

Just as a poor physical diet damages your physical health, a poor spiritual and mental diet will damage your spiritual and mental health. As you start the new year, take inventory of what you’re feeding your mind and soul. Rather than mindlessly consuming whatever you find on the television or internet, go for a walk and praise God for the beauty of the changing season. Call or send an encouraging card to a struggling friend or estranged family member. When you wake up, pick up your Bible before you pick up your cell phone. Before you listen to the world’s news, take time to pray and commune with God.

**Thank you,
Lord,**

**for the gift of this day. Help me to fix my heart and
mind on you and the things that are right, true, noble,
lovely, and pure. Help me to go through this day with
my soul centered on you. Amen.**

REV. CALEB HONG

ANNUAL CONFERENCE SHEPHERDING TEAM, CO-CHAIR
NORTHERN ILLINOIS CONFERENCE

*The Lord is my shepherd.
I lack nothing.
He lets me rest in grassy meadows;
he leads me to restful waters;
he keeps me alive.
He guides me in proper paths
for the sake of his good name.*
-Psalm 23:1-3, CEB

Practicing hope is a worldwide thing that everyone should do among friends and family, but most importantly, with people reaching out for help.

Sometimes the little actions that you do can go a long way. Like complimenting someone on their outfit, lending a small hand with a person carrying groceries, or even helping someone with their house; it's the smallest of actions that people take to heart, and which can bring them hope.

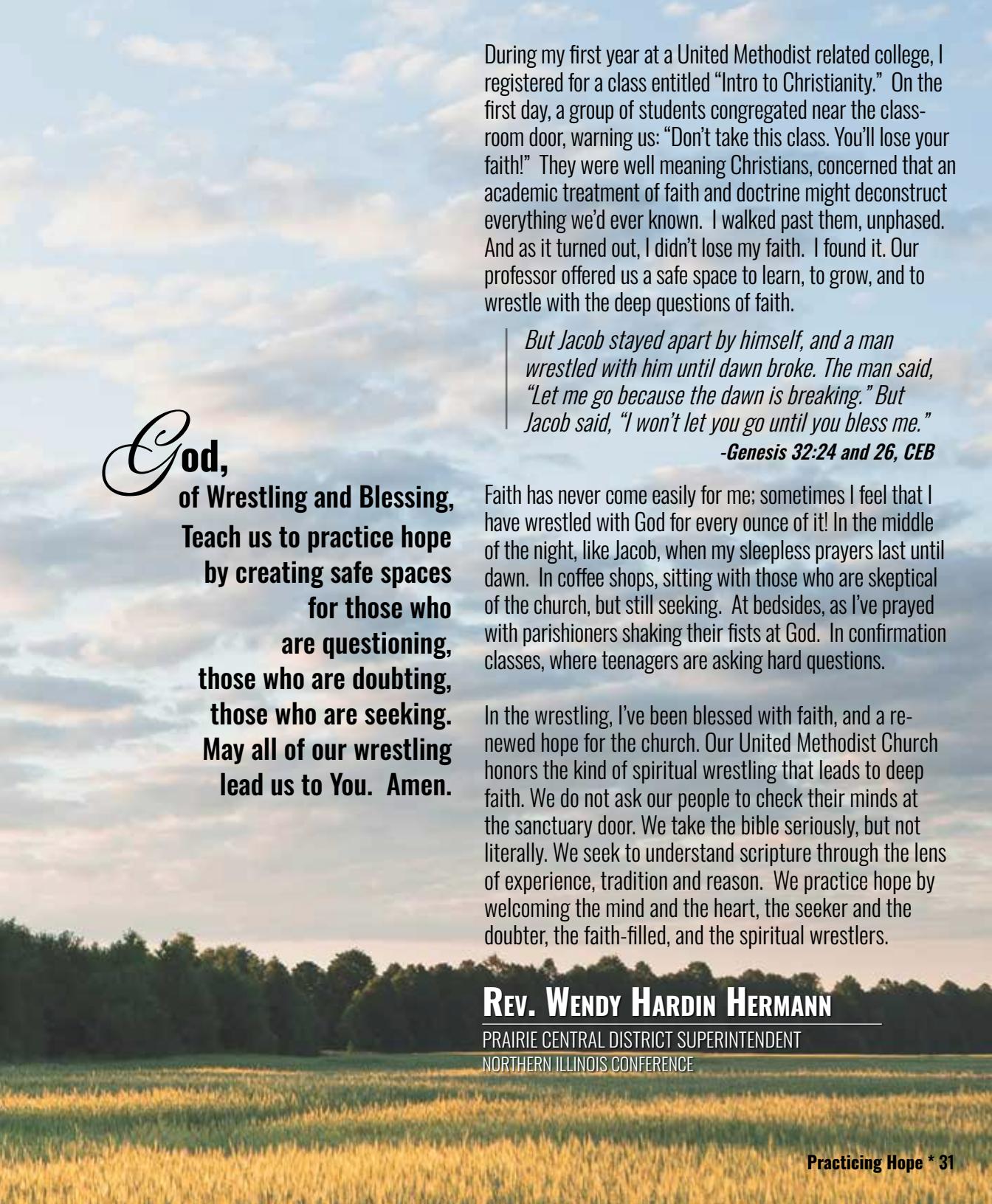
Seeing and celebrating acts of kindness that happen around you, such as a person giving out free meals to the poor on the street, is also a great way to uplift and take care of those you love, like your grandparents and parents.

But for me hope is going that extra mile, staying positive, doing something fun, and being kind to everyone every day, praying, and sharing your joys and concerns with the world around you.

*P*rayer
**As the sun rises on our
day may your light dawn
in our hearts and reveal
your character and
goodness to us as we
put our hope in you.**
Amen.

REV. DR. NISAL SAHABANDHU

ST. PAUL'S UMC, GREEN BAY, WI
WISCONSIN ANNUAL CONFERENCE



God,
**of Wrestling and Blessing,
Teach us to practice hope
by creating safe spaces
for those who
are questioning,
those who are doubting,
those who are seeking.
May all of our wrestling
lead us to You. Amen.**

During my first year at a United Methodist related college, I registered for a class entitled “Intro to Christianity.” On the first day, a group of students congregated near the classroom door, warning us: “Don’t take this class. You’ll lose your faith!” They were well meaning Christians, concerned that an academic treatment of faith and doctrine might deconstruct everything we’d ever known. I walked past them, unphased. And as it turned out, I didn’t lose my faith. I found it. Our professor offered us a safe space to learn, to grow, and to wrestle with the deep questions of faith.

But Jacob stayed apart by himself, and a man wrestled with him until dawn broke. The man said, “Let me go because the dawn is breaking.” But Jacob said, “I won’t let you go until you bless me.”

-Genesis 32:24 and 26, CEB

Faith has never come easily for me; sometimes I feel that I have wrestled with God for every ounce of it! In the middle of the night, like Jacob, when my sleepless prayers last until dawn. In coffee shops, sitting with those who are skeptical of the church, but still seeking. At bedsides, as I’ve prayed with parishioners shaking their fists at God. In confirmation classes, where teenagers are asking hard questions.

In the wrestling, I’ve been blessed with faith, and a renewed hope for the church. Our United Methodist Church honors the kind of spiritual wrestling that leads to deep faith. We do not ask our people to check their minds at the sanctuary door. We take the bible seriously, but not literally. We seek to understand scripture through the lens of experience, tradition and reason. We practice hope by welcoming the mind and the heart, the seeker and the doubter, the faith-filled, and the spiritual wrestlers.

REV. WENDY HARDIN HERMANN

PRAIRIE CENTRAL DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT
NORTHERN ILLINOIS CONFERENCE

He has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time.

-2 Timothy 1:9, NIV

While walking the journey of life, I have sometimes felt that God is not with me. As I grew up in a broken family, I often had wondered: “Why was I born in my family? Where is God’s love and grace? Is there any hope for my life? What is God’s plan for me?” I was still young, but I had lots of questions and doubts about my life.

My faithful aunt kept reminding me, “My dear, I know that there is an intention of God for you. Don’t doubt it, instead, give thanks to God first by faith; God loves you so much.” It didn’t make sense to me at all; however, the encouragement and prayers of my aunt made me stick with God’s love and grace through my time of uncertainty and darkness.

The Bible verse I learned during a summer retreat in my teenage years provided the answer to questions I had been pondering for a long time. It was 2 Timothy 1:9. This verse told me that the call and purpose in my life stems not from my own efforts but from God’s grace. It encouraged me to view my life through the lens of divine intention and how to respond with a heart open to God’s calling especially when facing hardship.

I have learned that we’re called to live each day as a testimony to the grace that has transformed us. As we walk in this holy calling, we become a living witness to His love and grace.

REV. INSUN LEE

SOUTH EAST DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT
WISCONSIN ANNUAL CONFERENCE



A Journey of Hope

*Be joyful in hope,
patient in affliction,
faithful in prayer.*

-Romans 12:12, NIV

During All Saint's Day our family celebrates my dad's birthday. He is over 90 years old. It is a blessing to reach that age, but on the other hand there's a saying that "getting old is not for the faint of heart."

The testament of God's goodness is evident not only in my dad's age but also his testimonies pertaining to his devotion of communing with God daily. Despite my dad's growing weakness over the years, my siblings and I still run to him for strength and comfort in times of trouble. He says that his strength comes from knowing Jesus who's beside him each day.

**Gracious God,
When we seek your face in
the wee hours of the morning,
while it is yet dark, and all is
quiet, we pray that you would
bless us with the assurance
of your presence. Help us to
believe that you are able to
protect and provide for us and
our neighbors; that you will
do what you've always done
and be our liberator; that you
will love us unconditionally
and use us to be a help to our
brothers and sisters.
In your name we pray,
Amen.**

In our life's journey, it is inevitable that we face challenges, struggles, and pain. Like in our family, we've lost my mom and sister-in-law due to cancer. Also, just recently, my brother-in-law had a lymphoma but praise God that he is now done with his chemotherapy and being in remission.

St. Paul said that we should be joyful in hope because it is the engine that keeps our faith running. It is not mere wishful thinking but when we put our hope in God, who is always faithful to his promises, he will provide us a sense of peace and joy.

Holding on to God's promises gives us hope. It is counting on God's faithfulness that our hearts gain strength and joy in time of affliction no matter what the outcome may be. As John Wesley said, "The best thing of all is God is with us."

ROSEMARIE SERRA

ANTIGO UMC, WI
WISCONSIN ANNUAL CONFERENCE

*I call all this to mind - therefore, I will wait.
Certainly the faithful love of the Lord hasn't ended,
certainly God's compassion isn't through!
They are renewed every morning.
Great is your faithfulness.*

-Lamentations 3:21-23, CEB

Here we read the author of Lamentations trying to make sense of a world that no longer matches what they've been taught and believed about God, or about goodness. Think about it, what do you do when your lived experience contradicts what you've been taught to trust? It's easy to let devastation overshadow hope and the author doesn't deny that reality. They face it and still choose to believe that God's compassion continues.

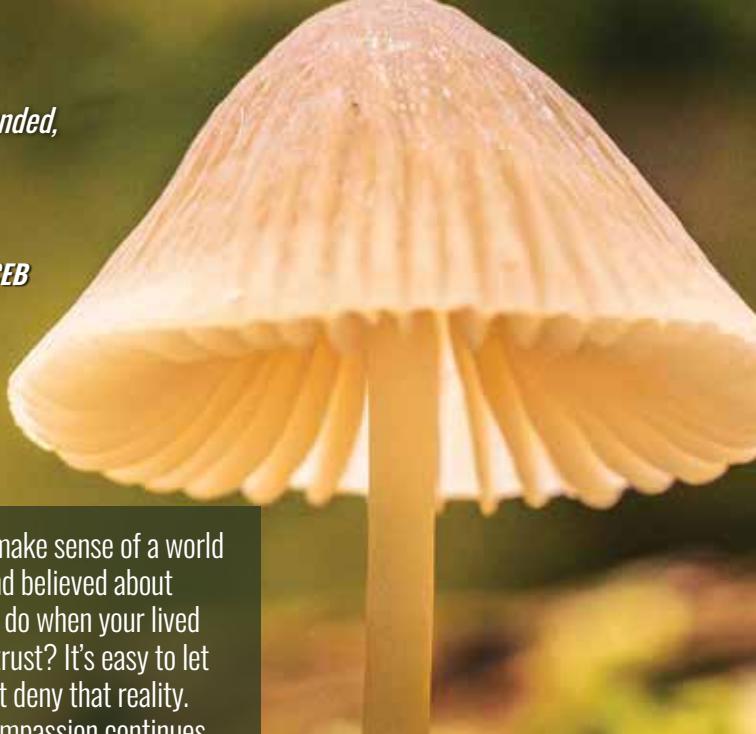
This choice feels painfully relevant today. Many of us have been taught that the United States stands for justice, liberty, and the common good and yet we see gaping inequalities, hatred justified by people claiming God, families displaced and broken by violence and so much more. Like the author, we find ourselves standing a rubble of broken promises, questioning where God's faithful love is to be found.

And yet... "therefore, I will wait." What if we see this verse not as a resignation, but as resistance. Waiting that expects mercy to rise again. Waiting that insists compassion and faithfulness are still God's ways and can still be ours. Waiting that is active.

We can do this by practicing hope that refuses to look away. By tending small mercies: feeding neighbors, marching for peace, teaching truth, advocating policy change, forgiving where possible, and all while grieving and holding what's lost. Practicing hope, actively waiting, means believing that even here, among what feels like ruins, Love is not through.

REV. HEATHER CONNOR

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH OF GENEVA, IL
NORTHERN ILLINOIS CONFERENCE


*Steadfast and
Compassionate God,*

**When the world feels
unrecognizable, remind
us that your mercy is not
finished. Renew our faith
that justice and kindness
can rise again. Teach us to
wait. Not with despair, but
with courage, conviction,
and care. Practicing hope-
filled living until your
faithful love is visible in us
and through us.
Amen.**

In the sacred echoes of my childhood,
one truth has remained a constant anchor:

*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—
and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—
not by works, so that no one can boast.*

-Ephesians 2:8-9, NIV

While the memory of how this verse first found its home in my heart is beautifully hazy, its profound implication has been a lifelong companion. It presents a divine mystery. The text is profoundly humbling, dismantling any pedestal of self-achievement we might be tempted to construct. We can claim no credit for our own salvation.

Yet, in that very humility, we find the most liberating truth. Our salvation is a gift, freely and lovingly given. Consider the world we inhabit—a world that relentlessly insists we earn our worth, that we “try harder,” that we pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. It is a world of transactions and merit, a system that inevitably leads to burnout and despair. But God’s economy operates on a different principle entirely: grace. It is a stunning interruption to our striving. We are not asked to earn what has already been bought; we are simply invited to receive it.

When we feel we cannot possibly do enough, God can. We need only to open our hands and trust that the gift God has always been offering will be placed within them. This is the same radical hope Jesus extended to all—the disciples, the crowds, the healed, and even the detractors. It is a hope that transcends time and circumstance, reaching for us now with that same profound, unconditional generosity.

REV. ERIC N. SWANSON

DIRECTOR OF CONNECTIONAL MINISTRIES
WISCONSIN ANNUAL CONFERENCE

**Great and Loving God,
We are humbled by the sheer
magnitude of Your grace.
Thank you for the gift of
salvation, a treasure we
could never earn but can
freely receive. Quiet the
demanding voices of
the world that tell us
we are not enough, and
help us rest in the
sufficiency of your
love. Empower us
to receive this
gift with open
hearts and to
share it with the
same radical
generosity you
have shown to us.
Amen.**

Unwavering Hope

The author of Hebrews knew his readers were facing intense pressure and persecution, tempting them to give up their faith and return to their former way of life. In response to this, a powerful call to perseverance is given:

Let's hold on to the confession of our hope without wavering, because the one who made the promises is reliable.

-Hebrews 10:23, CEB

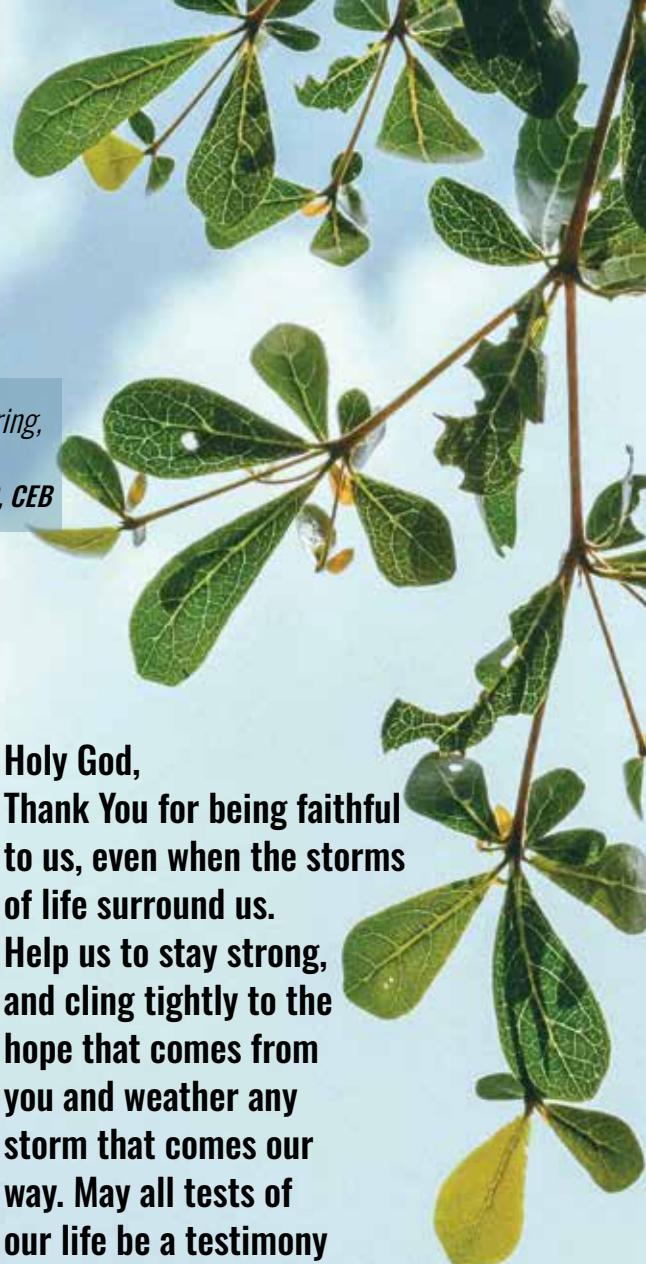
Beloveds, life is full of uncertainties, complexities and changes. We make plans but things often don't go as expected. In those moments, it is easy to feel anxious and our hearts to feel tossed around, like a ship without an anchor in a storm.

My seminary years were filled with uncertainties and challenges. I struggled financially (I had a scholarship, but my living situation had changed unexpectedly) and emotionally (my 2-year-old son was in India during my first year in seminary) among other challenges of life in general. But amidst those challenges I constantly experienced God's unwavering presence which strengthened my hope and kept me moving forward into the ministry that God was calling me to. Those experiences serve as reminders of God's faithfulness during the challenges of my life and ministry today.

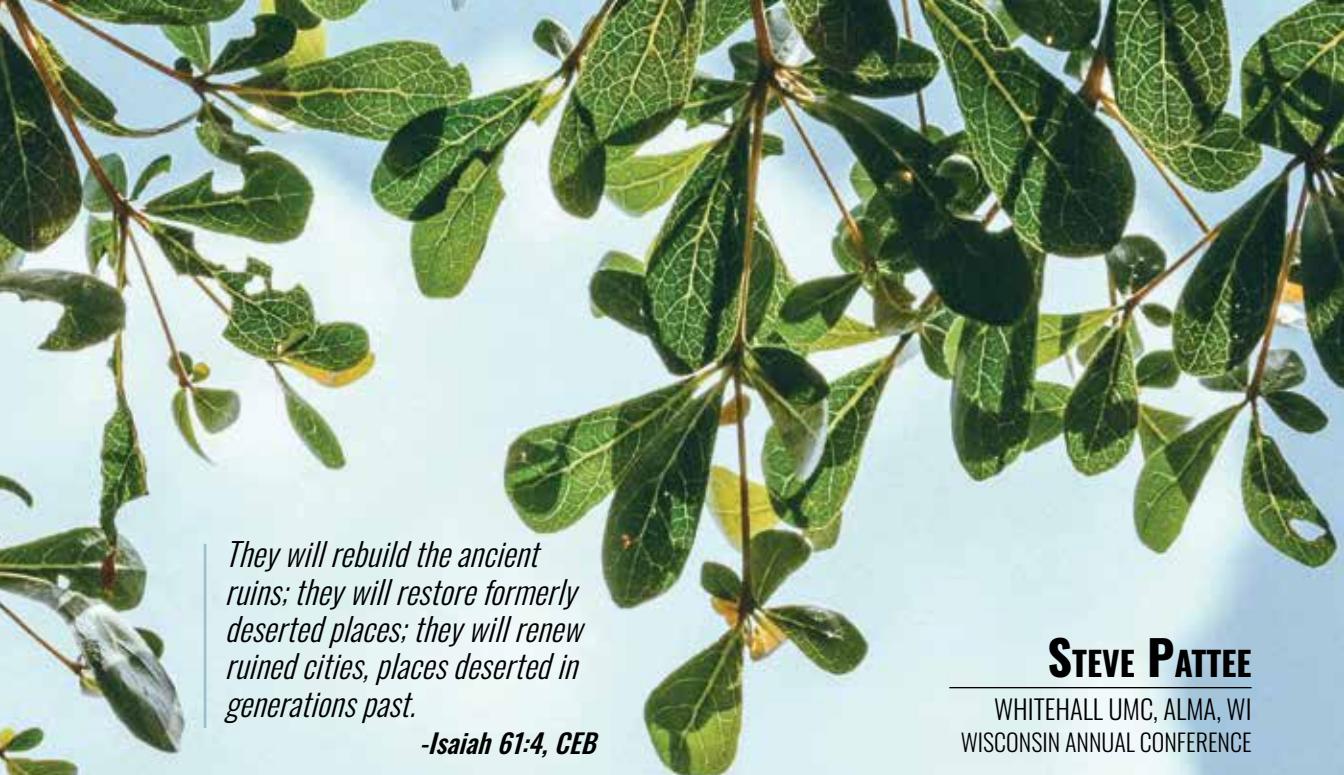
Are you facing storms that seem unrelenting? Do you feel you are at the end of your rope? If this is you, remember that God is holding the other end of the rope of your life, and God's love for you never changes. Hang on to that hope and stand firmly and securely on God's faithfulness.

REV. ALKA LYALL

BROADWAY UMC, CHICAGO, IL
NORTHERN ILLINOIS CONFERENCE



**Holy God,
Thank You for being faithful
to us, even when the storms
of life surround us.
Help us to stay strong,
and cling tightly to the
hope that comes from
you and weather any
storm that comes our
way. May all tests of
our life be a testimony
to Your unwavering
faithfulness.
In Jesus' name,
Amen.**



*They will rebuild the ancient
ruins; they will restore formerly
deserted places; they will renew
ruined cities, places deserted in
generations past.*

-Isaiah 61:4, CEB

If there was ever a time that the Jews struggled with hope, it would have been when they returned from Babylon and saw that both Jerusalem and their Temple had been razed into rubble. Every part of their life was in disarray. But the most frightening thought would have been that they had been abandoned by God in whom they had put their trust and relied upon for protection and prosperity. Where was God now, and what was God doing?

But in the midst of their confusion, they were given the hope, the full confidence, that their city, Temple, their very life with God, would not remain as they now appeared. They needed to redirect their attention away from their current circumstances to the future when their praise of God and God's anointed would give them the strength to "build the ancient ruins, raise up devastations, and repair the ruined cities."

I must admit that as I look at the chaotic circumstances within which we now live, that I have sometimes felt a certain dread, despair, and hopelessness, similar to that

STEVE PATTEE

WHITEHALL UMC, ALMA, WI
WISCONSIN ANNUAL CONFERENCE

felt by the Jews as they confronted the reality of their ruined life. The same questions they asked – Where is God? What is God doing now? – are the questions I now ask in the midst of a world that is in disarray.

But the lesson they learned is the same one we all must heed. We must never lose hope. It is when circumstances seem most chaotic and hopeless that God enters into human affairs and does something extraordinary and wonderful. The returning exiles rebuilt their city and Temple when it seemed impossible. God loves to surprise us with the impossible. And that is where our hope lies.

I pray, God, that we will look not to our circumstances as that will lead only to despair and hopelessness. You are the God of surprises and the impossible. Let that always be our hope. Amen.

Look at how we honor those who have practiced endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job. And you have seen what the Lord has accomplished, for the Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

-James 5:11, CEB

I was I was newly out of college with a freshly minted music degree, having just arrived in Chicago from East Tennessee. Leora, the choir director at my church, invited me to join her teaching private music lessons to children at the Marcy Center in North Lawndale.

So every Saturday, for a number of years, together we headed to the Marcy Center. It was bustling with kids programming. The children were excited to take lessons using instruments borrowed from Marcy. The families paid one dollar a week to the Marcy Center, which was a lot of money in the late 1960's.

The area felt fairly desolate, interspersed with boarded up buildings and vacant lots. The streets were filled with blowing litter, so much litter! Every Saturday, Leora picked up trash all the way from the car to the Marcy Center door, putting it in a bag that she brought. I couldn't see much difference! When I asked why she bothered, she said that if she did it, maybe somebody else would too. Then someone else would. And maybe together it would make a difference. The next week, and for the rest of my time there, I brought my own bag. Somehow it felt like a small sign of hope. Because of that experience, I still look for small acts that alone don't make much difference, but cumulatively really matter.

I had the opportunity to take a tour of North Lawndale recently. I noticed that the area was mostly litter free and in good repair. There is new housing and more importantly, new hope.

ELLEN FELICIANO

URBAN VILLAGE CHURCH, CHICAGO, IL
NORTHERN ILLINOIS CONFERENCE

38 * Practicing Hope

*C*ompassionate God,
Help us to practice endurance
and to know that every small
act we do adds on to other
small acts. Together, with
your help, let our acts
become a mighty tide
overcoming lack of
compassion and
injustice.
Amen.



Practicing Hope in a Weary Body

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.
-2 Corinthians 4:16, NIV

There are days when our bodies tell the truth before we even say the words out loud. Shoulders tighten. Sleep never comes. Breathing feels shallow. We carry not only our own struggles, but the weight of headlines, communities in crisis, and the quiet burdens no one ever sees. Stress settles into our bones as if it has taken up residence.

Paul understood the tension of living in a body that grows weary while clinging to a God who promises renewal. His words to the Corinthians invite us into a holy paradox: even as life presses on us, hope can expand within us. Outwardly, we may feel stretched, tired, or worn thin—but inwardly, God is shaping resilience, strength, and newness.

Practicing hope doesn't mean pretending the stress isn't real. It means choosing, again and again, to anchor ourselves in the One who renews us daily. Hope is practiced when we pause long enough to breathe prayer into anxious spaces. When we let Scripture speak louder than our fears. When we make small choices of trust—a walk outside, a moment of gratitude, an honest conversation with God about what hurts.

Our bodies will feel the pressures of the world. But the Spirit within us is not fragile. The renewal God offers isn't a single moment—it's a rhythm, a daily infusion of grace that meets us right in our fatigue.

Today, let your tired places become invitations. Ask God to renew the parts of you that feel stretched thin. Lean into the quiet promise that even when the world wears you down, God is faithfully building you up—day by day, breath by breath, hope by hope.

*R*enewing God,

You know when we feel the stress of the world before we do. Help us to pause, breathe, and take the time to renew our hope for the days ahead. Amen.

AMANDA HINTHORN

SUN PRAIRIE UMC, WI
WISCONSIN ANNUAL CONFERENCE

But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

-Isaiah 40:31, NIV

Gracious & Almighty God,

**Thank You for being the source
of our strength when we are
weary and worn. Teach us to
wait on You with trust and hope.
Lift us above our worries, help
us to walk faithfully in Your path,
and give us courage to keep
running the race You've set
before us. May Your Spirit
renew us daily, that we may
soar on wings like eagles.
Amen.**

Isaiah's words were spoken to a weary people—exiled, burdened, and uncertain about the future. Yet into their exhaustion, God through Isaiah speaks a promise of renewal. The secret to enduring strength, is not found in striving harder or doing more, but in hoping on the Lord. Another term use with hope is wait.

To wait is not to sit in helpless idleness. It is an act of faith—trusting that God is still at work even when we cannot see it. Waiting therefore is practicing hope; it's the soul's declaration that God's timing and wisdom are better than our own.

When we are tired of running life's race, when our own wings feel too weak to fly, God invites us to trade our strength for His. Like eagles catching the thermal winds, we are lifted not by our own power but by the steady current of the Spirit. In that divine exchange, fear turns to faith, and weariness turns to worship.

So today, whatever your struggle or season, pause to rest in God's presence. Let His peace settle over your heart. Renewal is coming—not because of your endurance, but because of His endless grace.

REV. VICTOR O. MELAD, JR.

LAKE NORTH DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT
NORTHERN ILLINOIS CONFERENCE

*Let those who plant with tears reap
the harvest with joyful shouts.
Let those who go out,
crying and carrying their seed,
come home with joyful shouts,
carrying bales of grain!*

-Psalm 126:5-6, CEB

How do we approach a new year, a new month, a new week, a new day in the face of difficulty, division, and the darkness that tempts us to despair?

A few years back, I came across a comic near the end of the year, one character, clearly anxious and stressed, asks another, “Why are you so optimistic about the New Year? What do you think it will bring?” The second character calmly replies, “I think it will bring flowers.” The first counters, “Yeah? How come?” Finally, the second responds, kneeling with a watering can and a little trowel, “because I’m planting flowers.”

Psalm 126 is a “psalm of ascents”, a song that pilgrims might sing on their way up to the Temple in Jerusalem. I imagine what it must have felt like when they brought the firstfruits of the first harvest after their return from Exile in Babylon. The hope that they carried through many years had been vindicated. The words of hope and comfort from the prophets had been proven true. How hard must it have been for them to plant that first crop, while they were waiting for others to make their way back, thinking about all that had been lost?

And still, they planted, ready to rejoice if and when God gave a harvest. That is the ***practice*** of hope.

What seeds are you planting today?

God of the seed, the womb, the depths of the heart, and the farthest reaches of the universe, your grace is moving in places and ways that we cannot see, yet. Even as we weep over the distance between what is and the world of justice and wholeness that you intend, help us to keep planting seeds of love. May the faith that has been planted in our lives bear fruit in bold love, joyful service, and courageous leadership, that others might find hope in you. Amen.

REV. SEAMUS ENRIGHT

COMMITTEE ON DISCIPLESHIP AND
SPIRITUAL FORMATION, CHAIR
NORTHERN ILLINOIS CONFERENCE

A (Non-Comprehensive) Playlist for Practicing Hope

FROM OUR UNITED METHODIST HYMNAL

87 – Mountains Are All Aglow
97 – For the Fruits of This Creation
108 – God Hath Spoken by the Prophets
110 – A Mighty Fortress Is Our God
117 – O God, Our Help in Ages Past
128 – He Leadeth Me; O Blessed Thought
129 – Give to the Winds Thy Fears
132 – All My Hope Is Firmly Grounded
133 – Leaning on the Everlasting Arms
140 – Great Is Thy Faithfulness
142 – If Thou But Suffer God to Guide Thee
178 – Hope of the World
192 – There's a Spirit in the Air
196 – Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus
202 – People, Look East
266 – Heal Us, Emmanuel, Hear Our Prayer
274 – Woman in the Night
305 – Camina, Pueblo de Dios
 (Walk On, O People of God)
310 – He Lives
313 – Christo Vive (Christ Is Risen)
318 – Christ Is Alive
357 – Just as I Am, Without One Plea
364 – Because He Lives
368 – My Hope Is Built
383 – This Is a Day of New Beginnings
415 – Take Up Thy Cross
419 – I Am Thine, O Lord
426 – Behold a Broken World
428 – For the Healing of the Nations
429 – O Master, Let Me Walk with Thee
434 – Cuando El Pobre (When the Poor Ones)
437 – This Is My Song
439 – We Utter Our Cry
448 – Go Down, Moses

451 – Be Thou My Vision
467 – Trust and Obey
474 – Precious Lord, Take My Hand
480 – O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go
508 – Faith, While Trees Are Still in Blossom
510 – Come, Ye Disconsolate
515 – Out of the Depths I Cry to You
518 – O Thou, in Whose Presence
519 – Lift Every Voice and Sing
533 – We Shall Overcome
534 – Be Still, My Soul
545 – The Church's One Foundation
554 – All Praise to Our Redeeming Lord
568 – Christ for the World We Sing
577 – God of Grace and God of Glory
581 – Lord, Whose Love Through Humble Service
583 – Sois la Semilla (You Are the Seed)
584 – Lord, You Give the Great Commission
585 – This Little Light of Mine
586 – Let My People Seek Their Freedom
589 – The Church of Christ, in Every Age
591 – Rescue the Perishing
593 – Here I Am, Lord
620 – One Bread, One Body
634 – Now Let Us from This Table Rise
643 – When Love Is Found
694 – Come, Ye Thankful People, Come
698 – Abide with Me
703 – Swing Low, Sweet Chariot
707 – Hymn of Promise
712 – I Sing a Sing of the Saints of God
715 – Rejoice, the Lord Is King
730 – O Day of God, Draw Nigh
731 – Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken

(SOME) CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN MUSIC

In Christ Alone (My Hope Is Found)

– Keith Getty & Stuart Townend

My Hope is in You – Aaron Shust

Song of Hope (Heaven Come Down)

– Robbie Seay Band

I Will Wait (Psalm 130) – Shane and Shane

Psalm 126 – Bifrost Arts

Living Hope – Phil Wickham

Even If – MercyMe

Overcomer – Mandisa

We Will Feast In the House of Zion

– Sandra McCracken

He Will – Ellie Holcomb

Light Up the Sky – The Afters

This Road – Jars of Clay

We Are Yours – I Am They

We Won't Be Shaken – Building 429

I Believe – Mark Miller

Still Waters (Psalm 23) – Leanna Crawford

Way Maker - Sinach

Hills and Valleys – Tauren Wells

By Your Side – Tenth Avenue North

How Can I Keep From Singing? – Audrey Assad

OUTSIDE THE EXPECTED

We Rise – Batya Levine

Would You Harbor Me

– Sweet Honey in the Rock

As The Hart Panteth – William Billings





Practicing Hope



Northern Illinois Conference
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