



# Chalk drawings in the rain

God's reminder that we can still have fun in the storms

She held my hand tightly. Or maybe I was the one holding tightly. I guess it doesn't matter. All I remember is that I didn't want Helen to go.

Helen was the matriarch of the "old white church," as the locals called it. I tried to convince myself the "old" referred to the age of the building and not its members. The white clapboard structure was built by Scotch-Irish Presbyterians in the 18th century. I couldn't deny, though, the noticeable creaking on a Sunday morning of aging knees along with the ancient floorboards.

I never imagined myself in a creaking country church struggling to revive itself in an area where the scarcity of jobs meant fewer young families moving in. Not to mention there were no Thai restaurants around. What was I to do?

I went. I had to. It was a strange, strong call. I would learn to live without mango curry. But live without Helen?

Helen's card was the first piece of mail to arrive in my rickety mailbox that had been knocked down one too many times by snowplows. And, on my first Sunday as pastor, someone announced that it was Helen's birthday. I smiled, marveling at the idea of someone thriving in their 90s. Helen just shrugged. Clearly, it was no big deal.

I quickly came to love Helen's pragmatism. As a dairy farmer's wife, Helen knew about storms and sunshine. She knew, too, that it was better to greet the storms with a smile, always trusting that the sun would come again.

She would share her wisdom with me over tea in the kitchen of the family farmhouse. In mud season, I would make sure to take my boots off and place them with the other boots lined up in the entryway. I would then sit at the table covered with greeting cards that Helen would always be writing. As I settled in, she would talk about the church's glory days. I would talk about its challenges. The conversation always ended with Helen having the last word: *Donna, God has never let go of the church. Trust.*

I would squeeze her hand before saying goodbye and then put my boots back on and slosh off in the mud, trying to believe her.

My last talk with Helen came too soon for me. This time it was at the side of her nursing home bed rather

than at her kitchen table. I selfishly told her that she couldn't leave me. I needed her belief that God was with our church in its storms.

Though weak and frail, she said in her pragmatic way, "You don't need me. God is with you." And with that, I reluctantly loosened my grip on her hand and let it fall softly away.

It's been 10 years this June since I said goodbye to Helen. Throughout those years, the "old white church" has seen its share of storms as well as sun. And I've learned something important about where God has called me. Our church, like many others, may look as if it is dying, but life still abounds. We just need to look at things differently. We need to see that when only two or three gather for a Bible study, that's not failure. That's two or three people sitting in the presence of God. And the children? While none might be in a pew on a Sunday morning, they know that the pastor and church members know their names and can't wait to see their calves, goats and chickens that they hope will win a blue ribbon at the county fair.

The thing is, more and more of our churches are like the "old white church." And it's why we need more Helens telling us that God is always with us — the sun does come out again after a storm.

Recently I pulled into the church parking lot and noticed two children drawing pictures in brightly colored chalk at the entryway. I knew these children. They used to draw pictures by the front door regularly. It had been a while since Sunday worshippers had been greeted by their works of art.

Here they were, drawing again — and drawing with chalk in cold, heavy rain! They weren't deterred by the storm, though. They were having fun. My first inclination was to get them out of the rain, but I didn't. There was something holy in the moment.

I realized then I was being shown faith in action. I was being shown the importance of keeping on drawing, serving, creating, worshiping, being the body of Christ, even when the rain pours down.

There we stood in the rain, admiring the pictures that blurred with each drop of water. It was then that a little hand covered with pink chalk dust took mine. I held it tightly. As I did, I heard Helen once again.

God is with our churches — big and small — in the rain and in the sunshine. Now let us find the faith and the courage to draw in chalk even when the rains are coming down.

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## CALL TO ACTION

Invite members of your church to share stories of how God is at work among you. Give each person colored chalk and invite them to draw pictures or write words of thanksgiving on your church’s sidewalk or in the parking lot. And, if it rains, don’t cancel the fun!

## Mentorship matters

### Value in the connectional system

*By Olympia Hine McCrackin*

If the statistics are correct that more than 50 percent of ministers leave ministry within the first five years, could having a strong mentor walking beside a new minister reverse the trend?

I graduated in December from the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary’s Commissioned Ruling Elder (CRE) program. I began my journey intentionally praying for a mentor. I wanted someone who would give me advice with grace and truth, even if it hurt. The Rev. Dr. Mary M. Porter was that person. A parish associate at Shades Valley Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, Alabama, Mary



has a way of speaking the truth in love. When I prepared my sermon for the Committee on Ministry examination, Mary gave wonderful advice, telling me to speak in my own way.

I have no idea how much importance seminary graduates and other CREs place on the value of a mentor, but I would advise them to seek out one. Mary and I have had deep conversations, and she is always there with prayer and words of encouragement. Her Christlike spirit echoes for me what our connectedness is all about as a denomination — it’s Christ who unites us.

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## Seen and heard at Session

For 21 teens at Shallowford Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, the road to confirmation was both exciting and informative. Not only did they learn about the sacraments, the Bible and the mysteries of the Trinity, they also got to see the church at work by attending Session. Some of the teens shared what they liked about that experience in the church’s quarterly magazine, *Sacred Space*:

- Seeing how many people truly care for this church — *Sydney Erickson*
- The devotion/prayer at the beginning of the meeting — *Elizabeth Blass*
- Seeing the behind-the-scenes of the church — *Kylee Herbert*
- Everyone respects each other and takes their part seriously — *Luke Jordan*

## PC(USA) Snapshot

### Top languages spoken in PC(USA) congregations besides English, Spanish and Korean

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Source: PC(USA) Research Services, Survey of 9077 Clerks of Session and mid council leaders, February 2018. Graphic by Jeffrey Lawrence

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