Great expectations not novel

Signs of life to be found across this church if we take the time to notice

By Elizabeth A. Eaton

*Now the wife of a member of the company of prophets cried to Elisha, “Your servant my husband is dead; and you know that your servant feared the Lord, but a creditor has come to take my two children as slaves.” Elisha said to her, “What shall I do for you? Tell me, what do you have in the house?” She answered, “Your servant has nothing in the house, except a jar of oil.” He said, “Go outside, borrow vessels from all your neighbors, empty vessels and not just a few. Then go in, and shut the door behind you and your children, and start pouring into all these vessels; when each is full, set it aside.” So she left him and shut the door behind her and her children; they kept bringing vessels to her, and she kept pouring. When the vessels were full, she said to her son, “Bring me another vessel.” But he said to her, “There are no more.” Then the oil stopped flowing. She came and told the man of God, and he said, “Go sell the oil and pay your debts, and you and your children can live on the rest”* (2 Kings 4:1-7).

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tephen P. Bouman, executive director of the ELCA Congregational and Synodical Mission unit, often uses this Bible story when talking to groups about the possibilities for mission and ministry in their neighborhood. He asks them what catches their attention in this story—some say the desperate poverty, others say the anguish of children being forced into slavery. Everyone says the miracle of the oil.

What people rarely notice and what Bouman always points out is Elisha’s question to the woman. His point is that no matter how bleak a congregation’s circumstances seem to be, there already exists some capacity in that congregation for mission and ministry. We are not helpless people without agency. God has already given us what we need to participate with God in the work of God’s kingdom.

Too often we lapse into a paralysis of grief or anxiety or nostalgia that renders us incapable of seeing anything but scarcity. We don’t have enough money or members or young people. The creditors are at our door and we don’t even have any children to give them. The end isn’t near, it’s here.

One of the most frequently asked questions after I was elected was “What is your plan to reverse the decline in membership?” There are some major assumptions packed into that question—that I have the power to change the church, that there exists some miraculous plan or program that, if applied correctly, will save the church, to name just two. The question also assumes that all of our ministries and all of us live in absolutely empty houses, that we are helpless and completely lacking to be able to participate in God’s mission. That is not true.

Recently I have been hearing stories about sightings of life across this church. Bishop H. Julian Gordy of the Southeastern Synod reports that some congregations that reduced or completely cut mission support in 2009 are now increasing or reinstating it. At its assembly this spring the South Carolina Synod welcomed three new congregations that grew from mission starts. Bishop James E. Hazelwood of the New England Synod challenged folks at that assembly to make up a $25,000 budget deficit. By the end of the assembly they had pledges for more than $63,000. It seems when asked, “What have you in the house?” they were all able to find something that God could work with.

All of these sightings remind me of the first green shoots that poked up through this winter’s snow. There weren’t many at first and they didn’t immediately overcome one of the bitterest winters on record, but they were there.

When I read the story of the widow and the oil I noticed something else—Elisha told the woman to gather vessels “and not just a few.” God was going to provide abundantly and she had better be prepared for that abundance. How often do we expect too little if we dare to expect God will act at all? The ELCA is God’s house and in it is everything we need—word and water, bread and wine—to participate in God’s mission. I challenge all of us to notice signs of life and send them in. Join the conversation at **Facebook.com/Lutherans** or **twitter.com/ELCABishopEaton** and post your **#signsoflife**. M

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