Looking Ahead

December 2011/January 2012

In the previous newsletter I spent some time looking back, reminiscing on half a lifetime with you as your pastor. As I pen my last words to Poplar Ridge, I find that this December/January edition is the perfect forum for looking ahead. These two months ground us in two of the most important areas of focus as Christians, our message and our vision, which is where I want to focus.

Several years ago, a noted Quaker was giving his observations of the Meetings in North Carolina Yearly Meeting that had vitality. He mentioned Poplar Ridge’s growth and fruit and then classified our Meeting as “a sleeping giant.” He used this imagery to communicate the unrealized potential of this wonderful congregation.

Ever since I felt God call me to Poplar Ridge Friends Meeting I have prayed for this “good giant” to awaken, and in numerous ways he has. The ministry of Poplar Ridge has touched so many lives and continues to do so. Families who have been in desperate places have received comfort and support from you generous people. Adults and children have heard of a person named Jesus Christ who loves them and wants to bless their lives. Lone souls who have come to us oppressed with darkness have found Light through God’s Spirit working among us. Countless hours of service have been rendered to enhance ministry and provide resources for our great calling. Bodies have experienced healing and have given testimony of extended years far beyond medicine’s prophecy. Spiritual and physical food has been shared in abundance with this community and beyond. The fingerprint of Poplar Ridge Friends Meeting has stretched throughout the world.

So where do you go from here? I humbly offer you three admonitions as I leave...

First, hold fast to the unchanging message. December is the time we celebrate Christmas, the first coming of our Savior. Christmas reminds us of our mission as Christians. Christ came to earth to save this world from sin and self, and He left us with a commission. Christ leads us to spread the Good News of His Gift to everyone. My hope is that you will always keep the pure Gospel message, and its spreading, as your greatest calling.

Second, be relevant to an ever-changing culture. January is the time we become open to new beginnings. January is a time of year that marks change in our lives. This impresses me to challenge you to be open to new ways of sharing the unchanging message of our faith. Most of us do not like change. Many are afraid of change. I pray you will fear irrelevance more than change. I pray that you will be
more wary of becoming complacent than of embracing new rituals. I pray that your worship and ministry will reach all ages with an ageless message, especially the youngest who might be the hardest generation we have ever tried to reach.

I know that this creates a dilemma: what needs to change and what does not need to change? This is where we trust the Holy Spirit to lead us all. I am reminded of a part of the famous Serenity Prayer...“God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.” I want to modify this great prayer to address the glorious challenges that await us as disciples of Jesus. Consider praying this prayer: “God grant us the steadfastness to hold to the things that should not change; courage to accept the things which should change; and wisdom to know the difference.” The Holy Spirit can lead us to know what needs to be gripped more tightly, and what needs to be released so that we can be effective in our mission.

Third, do it together. The seasonal fellowship of the holidays reminds us of our interdependence on one another. Unity is indispensable. The Bible never describes the church as “a collection of individuals” but as a family, a community, a fellowship, the Body of Christ. Doing difficult things alone is hard. Doing difficult things together can sometimes be harder, but infinitely more rewarding. Remember, unity is not the absence of conflict, but the presence of a collective purpose. Unity = power.

So, as I sign off on this leg of my journey I do so with great appreciation, affection and with anticipation. Poplar Ridge’s best days are ahead. As you continue on this glorious quest always know that LeAnne, Ragan, Haley and I will always love and cherish you. You are all permanently etched in our hearts.

Randy