

New Hope's Ministers

Preachers, Neighbors, Co-Workers

Perhaps in some circles it really is known as the “church of smashed fingers.”

That’s possible because at least one parishioner has commented that at New Hope Church of the Brethren in Frost, W.Va., “all of your preachers have smashed fingers.”

The preachers’ identification with working people, whose hands tend to have calluses and scars and bruises, is a strength at New Hope. The congregation is a welcoming place that puts no stock in “what your job is, what you wear, what you drive... Come as you are; let the Lord meet you here,” summarizes Julian Rittenhouse, one of five bi-vocational preachers in team ministry at New Hope.

It’s a philosophy that’s working. The sprawling white church building, built in 2003 and opened in 2004 and paid off two years later, is alive on Sunday mornings, with attendance averaging 140. What’s really impressive for many whose congregations are largely populated with older folks is this: it’s a young congregation. By June, there will be 22 infants and toddlers under the age of 2 and 76 under the age of 18. One year, the congregation had 19 college students. The 2016 Christmas program had 91 participants and drew a crowd of about 250.

And 50-60 people attend Wednesday night Bible study; five small groups are meeting on Sunday evenings in January;



SHARING THE PULPIT — The four Rittenhouse men who share the pulpit at New Hope Church of the Brethren are all Bridgewater College graduates (and, obviously, none of them owns stock in Gillette or Schick razors!) From left, Abe (BC Class of 2014); Julian ('84), David ('56) and Nate ('09).

Photo/story by Ellen K. Layman

about 10 men gather at the church early every Saturday morning for prayer.

And the congregation budgets \$70,000 every year for missions and outreach, supporting as many as 16 separate missions. A strong relationship has been built with Camp Brethren Woods; delegates represent New Hope at every District Conference and Annual Conference.

The connections that foster the growth and the youth demographic are rooted in two areas, the make-up of the congregation and the bi-vocational ministry. The membership includes a number of teachers and health-care professionals. It is possible for a child to go through elementary

school in Pocahontas County and have a teacher from the New Hope congregation every year and then take classes from other members who are teachers at middle school and high school. Add the contacts with the congregation’s doctor, nurses, physical therapist and aides, and that’s a lot of relationships.

Then there’s the team ministry.

Four of the five preachers are out in the community, on the job, rubbing elbows with local residents and modeling the Christian life every day.

David Rittenhouse, at 85 the patriarch of the group,

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farms and is a regular presence at the senior center, conducting Bible study while his wife, Laura Jean, leads music. A former substitute teacher, school attendance counselor and school bus driver, he also is in constant demand to conduct funerals throughout Pocahontas County, noting that over the past 16 years, he has averaged a funeral every 13 days.

Julian, David's son, teaches at the elementary and middle schools.

Abe, Julian's son, also a farmer, teaches health and physical education at Pocahontas County High School.

Daniel Solliday works in the timber industry, where the logging site can become a mission field.

The fifth preacher, Nate Rittenhouse, also Julian's son, perhaps isn't as visible on a daily basis. He is an itinerant speaker with Ravi Zacharias International Ministries (RZIM), traveling frequently and working from a home office when not on the road. A lot of his ministry has been on college and university campuses, including Harvard, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Boston College. He admits that preaching about once a month at New Hope has an almost recreational feel after the pace of his RZIM commitments.

The five have worked out a preaching schedule for New Hope (first Sunday, Daniel; second Sunday, Nate; third Sunday, Abe; fourth Sunday, Julian; fifth Sundays, David), but parishioners never really know who will be preaching on any given Sunday. It's a rather fluid schedule.

Julian gives a for-instance: Usually he works on his sermon on Saturday evening. One week, inspiration deserted him. He woke several times during the night, agitated that he had no sermon prepared. At 5 a.m., he called his dad, explained his dilemma. David responded that, it just so happened, the children's story he was working on had taken on a life of its own and would work better as a sermon. David preached ("for 45 minutes," according to Julian); Julian had the children's story.

Actually, Julian preaches every Sunday. He also is pastor at Pine Grove Church of the Brethren at Arbovale, W.Va., where he is on salary, preaching there three weeks out of four. Abe's there on the third Sunday of each month. Julian also teams with Daniel to fill the pulpit at Boyer (also known as Kerr Memorial Chapel), a preaching point with services twice a month.

In addition to the preacher rotation, New Hope also has 10-12 men who take turns as worship leaders. David explains that the male-only leadership in New Hope's pulpit was an action spurred by what might seem to be an unlikely group – the women of the church. "They made the decision," he says. Women had been helping to preach and lead worship while David and Laura Jean were in Puerto Rico in 1981. Then, they realized that the gifts they recognized in their husbands and sons were not being called out. There were enough men, and "they wanted them to do it." Now, the men do.

Even so, women are a vital part of the New Hope ministry. The congregation is known for its hospitality. The women's fellowship, the Circle of Sisters, is active and plans an annual retreat. "The men do all the preaching and worship leading; the women run the church," David opines. He particularly notes that Julian's wife, Lucy, has strong organizational skills and is "at least half of his ministry." Julian nods in agreement.

For the Rittenhouses, the connection to Pocahontas County, W.Va., was made because a missionary assignment to India got tangled in visa delays. David, ordained since 1956, was asked if he and Laura Jean would instead go to Pocahontas County to try to revitalize the struggling congregations there. Except for three years in Ecuador and one in Puerto Rico, they have been in West Virginia, serving God and living as neighbors, since 1959.

New Hope, (where David recalls that his first sermon was preached before a congregation of seven "and three were sleeping"), along with Pine Grove and Boyer shared a meeting house with the Methodists.

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New Hope bought it in 1972, then built the present building in 2003. Julian recalls the “we didn’t lose one member” when the move was made in 2004. He also relates when they left the old building the procession included having “Mom playing the piano on a truck, and the men singing.” Now, they are starting to think about whether it’s time to expand.

The other four preachers came to the ministry a different way. All were called in what might be thought of as the “old Brethren” tradition, bypassing the procedure many congregations now use of naming a search committee, completing a congregational profile, conducting confidential interviews, seeking church board approval, scheduling a trial sermon and then taking a congregational vote.

Instead, at New Hope, when there is a need for another preacher or deacon, the congregation is asked to fast and pray for two weeks. No discussion about possible candidates is heard. No potential candidate is approached. At the end of the two weeks, each member writes a name on a slip of paper. The person, or persons, that the congregation favors is called. “We trust the call of the body,” David says.

Julian admits that he rejected the call the first time his name emerged from the congregation. He accepted upon receiving a second call more than 30 years ago and is now ordained.

Nate, Daniel and Abe all were called at the same time – Daniel just three years after being baptized. Nate and Abe weren’t even living in Pocahontas County at the time. All are now in the process of being licensed. All are college graduates. Nate has earned a master of divinity degree.

Each has different strengths. Julian describes himself and Abe as “more relational” and David and Nate as “more philosophical.” Daniel, considered a “gifted administrator,” is seen as a “no pretense” kind of man able to relate well with the workers on logging sites.

Nate looks at New Hope ministers as “native missionaries. . . In West Virginia, it takes a long time to be from here.” Missionaries sent to foreign lands often need to learn a new language and adjust to different cultural norms. The members of the New Hope team already speak the language and live the culture of their neighbors.

On Sunday mornings, Abe remarks, there is no feeling of separation between the leadership and the people. “It’s just one of the brothers getting up and sharing” what’s on his heart.

The four younger members of the ministry team hold David as a model for their own service in the church. He never let farm work take priority over church work. “He lived what he preached: ‘Be doers of the Word,’” Julian notes, going on to praise the “gracious way Dad has stepped back” a bit from active ministry to let the younger ones take more responsibility.

David counters that he considers himself “fortunate to be here. Not many young preachers want an old preacher around.”

That there are so many Rittenhouse ministers seems written into their genetic code. William Rittenhouse arrived in the New World in 1688, the first Mennonite preacher in America. In the 12 generations of Rittenhouses since then, 15 men were or are bi-vocational preachers – five Mennonites, nine Brethren and one Methodist.

Despite that heritage, the team at New Hope makes no claim that the bi-vocational ministry, and the empowerment of the laity that seems to partner with it, is the way of the future or that the paid ministry is not sustainable.

Rather, they state what they are doing in a simple declaration: “Christ is the head of the church. We are privileged to be His servants.”