

"Write the vision clearly on the tablets, that one may read it on the run." – Habakkuk

# THE VISION



July 2018

## New Plan to Nurture Hispanic Communities

As part of an initiative to revitalize its Hispanic ministries, the New York Conference has appointed four pastors to that work, three in existing churches and one in a new church start. The plan comes in response to a call made by Bishop Thomas J. Bickerton for a renewed and engaging presence among the Hispanic/Latino populations during the 2017 Annual Conference.

According to Rev. David A. Gilmore, the conference director of church development and revitalization, the plans for revitalization were developed after multiple conversations with the Hispanic American Council, Hispanic/Latino community leaders, the parish development committee, and members of the bishop's cabinet.

This "initiative will create, connect and transform through the recruitment, equipping, empowerment and deployment of visionary, fearless, Holy Spirit-filled leaders who not only



**Pastors Ruben Rivera-Martinez, Arnaldo Sanchez-Orta, Dorlimar Lebrón Malavé and Annette Rodriguez.**

will passionately advocate for all people and actively nurture existing disciples; but, most importantly, fervently desire and work towards making new disciples of Jesus Christ?" Gilmore wrote in an email.

Two of the pastors, Ruben Rivera-Martinez and Arnaldo Sanchez-Orta, were born in Puerto Rico and their appointments are part of the NYAC's commitment of continuing support for

**Continued on page 3**



### Surprise 60th Celebration

Bishop Thomas J. Bickerton is surrounded by the NYAC cabinet and staff at a June 27 party, an early celebration of his July 2 birthday. The outdoor party at the conference center featured lunch from three food trucks and, of course, some cake with candles.



For a full lineup of events, go to: [www.nyac.com/conferencecalendar](http://www.nyac.com/conferencecalendar).

### **July-August Conference Center Closed**

Friday closures of the White Plains office run through the end of August.

### **7/26–29 Creation Care Summit**

The Minnesota Annual Conference and Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary are co-sponsors for this event at Hamline University, St. Paul, Minn. The summit will look at key ways to heal the planet, and empowering Christians to bring about a more sustainable and just future for their communities and the planet. The sessions from Thursday noon through Friday afternoon are designed for UMC leaders in the working on creation care/environmental justice at any level of the church. Those who choose to attend these sessions will be asked to complete some assignments before they arrive. Friday evening through Sunday are designed for anyone interested in learning more about engaging in the work of creation care/environmental justice. For more info and to register, click [here](#).

### **7/27–29 Mission u**

The United Methodist Women and Board of Laity invite all to this time for spiritual growth and to expand your knowledge and concepts of mission. The 2018 studies are: “Embracing Wholeness: An Earth Perspective to Covenantal Living,” “What About Our Money? A Faith Response,” and the “Geographic Study: Missionary Conferences in U.S.” Participate in all three days at the Stamford Hilton, or drop in for the Saturday Sampler. [Register online](#) before July 1.

### **8/24–26 Calling All Singles Retreat**

Singles United in Christ will host a retreat in the Kirkwood House at Camp Olmsted. This is open to all singles. Rev. Dr. Marva Usher-Kerr will be the leader. The cost of the retreat is \$250. A flyer can be found [here](#). Questions to Angela Perez at [per7867@yahoo.com](mailto:per7867@yahoo.com) or 347-366-8727.

### **8/31 Social Principles Revision**

It's the final day to comment on the proposed changes to the UMC's Social Principles on the General Board of Church & Society [website](#). Watch

your district news for a “Community Conversation” about the changes happening near you.

### **9/3 Holiday Closing**

The conference center will be closed for the Labor Day holiday.

### **10/14–25 “Journeys of Paul” Cruise**

Bishop Thomas J. Bickerton will host the nine-day journey aboard Royal Caribbean’s “Jewel of the Seas,” in conjunction with Educational Opportunities Tours. Beginning and ending in Rome, the trip includes stops in Taormina and Pompeii, Italy; Mykonos, Santorini, Athens, and Corinth, Greece; and Ephesus, Turkey. There is also an optional two-day tour of Vatican City on October 25-26. Find the [reservation information](#) online. If you have any questions, contact [Rev. Chuck Ferrara](#), the regional representative for Educational Opportunities in our area.

### **10/20 UM Men’s Retreat**

This annual retreat for all men in the conference will explore the theme, “Hearts on Fire for God,” from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. at Memorial UMC in White Plains. Guest speaker is Rev. John Simmons Jr., pastor at Brooks Memorial UMC. Suggested donation is \$25. More information can be found [here](#).

### **11/17 Laity Convocation**

Rev. Sue Nilson Kibbey, author of “Flood Gates: Holy Momentum for A Fearless Church,” will be the presenter. Time and place are yet to be determined. Details can be found [here](#) as they become available.

### **July 2019 YOUTH 2019**

Join thousands of United Methodist youth (grades 6–12) for four days of discipleship, worship, Bible study, service opportunities, and life-changing fun in Kansas City, Mo. Expect inspiration, support, and challenges to grow authentically as a world-changing disciple of Jesus Christ.

This national gathering from July 10–14 will provide youth and their leaders with chances to connect with each other, denominational leaders, and connectional agencies to help discover the wide variety of ministries of the United Methodist Church.

### **Vision Deadlines for 2018**

The *Vision* is a monthly online publication of the New York Conference. Deadlines are always the first Friday of the month, with posting to the web site about 10 days later. The deadlines for 2018 are August 3, September 7, October 5, November 2, and December 7. Please send any stories, photos, ideas, or questions directly to [vision@nyac.com](mailto:vision@nyac.com).

 <p>The <b>Vision</b></p> <p>The News of the New York Conference of the United Methodist Church</p>
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# Detained UM Missionaries Safely Depart Philippines

## UMNS reports

All three United Methodist missionaries [who had been detained](#) in the Philippines are safely out of the country as of July 11, having returned to their home countries. The last to be allowed to leave was Miracle Osman of Malawi. Adam Shaw of Ohio and Tawanda Chandiwana were released earlier this month.

All three faced accusations of anti-government activities. Chandiwana had been held by authorities for weeks, while the other two had not been allowed to leave the country.

Shaw reached Brunswick, Ohio, on July 4 and was reunited with his parents, the Rev. Thomas Shaw and Susan Shaw.

The father, pastor of Brunswick United Methodist Church, said the denomination's support was "very, very important to know that Adam wasn't alone and that we were not alone in supporting him."

He added: "We're happy for him but feel his sadness that he had to leave the country where God had called him."

Adam Shaw urged people to continue to share the story of the missionaries in their churches and on social media.

"The Philippines is one of those countries where people of faith really have a voice and are

listened to regardless of whether they are in the Philippines. . . ." he said. "Part of the effort in detaining us was to silence our voices and the voices of those we lift up in our work. Refusing to let the voices be silenced is a huge step that we as a church can do both through the petition and our churches."

Global Ministries worked unsuccessfully behind the scenes [then led a public campaign](#) for the release of the three missionaries. The Council of Bishops [issued a statement](#), and about 13,000 people signed an online petition.

Thomas Kemper, top executive of Global Ministries, described himself as "so, so thankful" for the denomination's support.

[The New York Times reported](#) that Shaw was deported by the Philippines for having engaged in "political activities," and [another news source said](#) the government's Bureau of Immigration had placed all three missionaries on a blacklist because of "leftist" involvement.

But Global Ministries said the three were targeted for taking part in an international ecumenical fact-finding investigation of alleged human rights violations, including the deaths of nine indigenous people.

That mission was on the southern island of Mindanao, where President Rodrigo Duterte has

declared martial law and the military has battled Islamic militants, the Times reported.

Chandiwana was arrested May 9 while attending a training seminar at the Mindanao Peacebuilding Institute. He was held on a charge related to his visa status, but also was found to be on a government watch list for suspected subversives.

Osman's passport was confiscated as she was extending a tourist visa while waiting for her missionary visa to be approved, and Shaw had been informed that he would be deported, Global Ministries reported earlier.

Shaw was initially commissioned in 2011 as a mission intern. Lately he had been serving as an international linkages coordinator assigned to the Save Our Schools, Protect Indigenous Life Project, based in Davao City, Mindanao.

Chandiwana and Osman are Global Missions Fellows.

Kemper noted that missionaries are sent to take the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all parts of the world.

"That includes standing up for life where it has been threatened," he said. ". . . So we will not stop sending missionaries to the Philippines, to all countries in the world, because we feel that is our calling as United Methodists."

# New Plan to Nurture Hispanic Communities

## Continued from page 1

the island's recovery after Hurricane Maria.

Rivera-Martinez is serving the Flanders UMC on Long Island and is tasked with establishing a United Methodist presence in the growing Hispanic population in and around Riverhead. He has attended the Methodist Church in Puerto Rico (MCPR) since childhood and heard a call to ministry in his youth. He was ordained in the MCPR in 2012. Rivera-Martinez has served on the Board of Ordained Ministry in Puerto Rico, and as the spiritual director of the Crisolid Community there since 2017.

Sanchez-Orta has been a pastor for six years in the MCPR, but his passion for teaching led him to move his family to New Jersey to pursue a master's of sacred theology degree at the Theological School at Drew University. Appointed to serve Iglesia Evangelica de Co-op

City, he has been a professor of the Hebrew Bible and of systematic theology in Puerto Rico.

Primera Iglesia Hispana Metodista Unida (First Spanish UMC) in East Harlem is being led by Pastor Dorlimar Lebrón Malavé, a recent graduate with a master of divinity degree from Boston University School of Theology, and a newly licensed local pastor.

Lebrón, a talented musician, has grown up in—and served—the NYAC for more than 23 years; she is the daughter of Rev. Enrique Lebrón, pastor of Riverhead UMC. She has served with the Task Force on Immigration, Commission on Race and Religion, and the Board of Church and Society. Lebrón has been a student pastor at a church in Cuba, youth minister at Community UMC in Massapequa, and served the East Saugus Community UMC in Massachusetts while in seminary.

Lebrón has also served as a lay delegate to the 2016 General and Jurisdictional conferences.

Annette Rodriguez, who was born and raised in the Soundview and Parkchester sections of the Bronx, has been appointed to plant a congregation in the south end of the borough.

She has worked in hospital administration, holds a master's in business administration from Hofstra University, and earned a master's of divinity from Duke Divinity School in 2017. Additionally, Rodriguez has more than 15 years experience in Christian education, and most recently spent a season as a chaplain at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Durham, N.C.

"The anticipated outcome is to engage our Hispanic/Latino sisters and brothers, in the NYAC geographic region, in such a way that transformation of lives and communities occur," Gilmore added.

# Translated Way Forward Coming July 30

BY HEATHER HAHN

UMNS | Expect to see the Commission on a Way Forward's proposals in weeks—not months.

The organizers of General Conference, the denomination's top lawmaking assembly, announced that they expect the needed translation work to be completed by July 30—after which it can be made public.

The report is being translated from English to the three other official languages of General Conference—French, Kiswahili and Portuguese.

“As a matter of equity throughout the international church, it was deemed important to ensure that the report become available in all four languages at the same time,” said a statement by the Rev. Gary W. Graves, secretary of General Conference.

The Council of Bishops on July 9 revised its call for a special General Conference in 2019 so it will take up a report by the Commission on Way Forward.

The *Book of Discipline*, the denomination's policy book, requires all translated legislation to be distributed to delegates 90 days before General Conference. In this case, that deadline is November 26.

Agencies and others who submit General Conference legislation frequently post their legislation well ahead of the big meeting, but generally not in all official languages.

Given the unique nature of this special session, Graves said, General Conference organizers agreed that the Way Forward Commission and Council of Bishops could publicly post the commission's translated report before the deadline.

The move applies solely to what the Way Forward Commission has submitted—not other petitions.

The 32-member, bishop-appointed



**With the amended call, members of the Commission on a Way Forward—not the bishops—will present the report to the 2019 Special Session of General Conference.**

commission was charged with finding ways through the denomination's deep divide on homosexuality. It is offering legislative petitions for three different plans for ministry with LGBTQ individuals.

The bishops [initially announced](#) that they expected the needed translation work to be completed no later than July 8, the deadline for petitions to the special General Conference.

The delay, General Conference organizers said, was in part because of Judicial Council's Decision 1360, which expanded the number of petitions that could be filed and thus need translation.

In the May 25 ruling, the court said [other United Methodists could submit legislation](#) as long as the General Conference deems “the business proposed to be transacted in such petition is in harmony with the purpose stated in the call.”

To save money, the Commission on General Conference—the body that plans the big meeting—decided to have a contract that covered work for both the 2019 and 2020 General Conferences.

After the court ruling, the commission said, the scope of the 2019 portion of the contract had to be expanded and required significant updating before the bid and selection process could move forward.

“Combining the two contracts resulted in a significant cost savings to the general church,” said Sara Hotchkiss, General Conference business manager, in a statement.

She added that it also helps safeguard accuracy in translations by having the same company process all General Conference materials, using the approved United Methodist glossary.

**Continued on page 9**

## New Hymnal Timeline Revised

Discipleship Ministries and The United Methodist Publishing House, the supervising agencies of the new United Methodist hymnal who are working with the Hymnal Revision Committee, recently announced a plan to revise the timeline for work on the hymnal. A progress report will be shared with the 2020 General Conference, and a final report will be submitted to the 2024 General Conference for review and approval.

“The hymnal is a key resource in answering the historical questions: ‘What to teach?’ ‘How to teach?’ and ‘What to do?’” added Rev. Brian K. Milford, president and publisher of The United Methodist Publishing House. “By allowing time for the resolution of conflicts and greater consensus to emerge about key issues in our social teachings, ordination standards, and rules affecting marriages celebrated in UM

congregations—as well as providing ample time for an even more expansive search for additional tunes and texts selected from an array of new submissions that number as many as 5,000—the adjusted schedule will help assure that the next United Methodist hymnal collection serves the church as it worships, grows, and serves in the next decade and beyond.”

The report to the 2020 General Conference is expected to include previews of possible new hymns, tunes, and liturgical resources and opportunities for delegates to see prototypes of some anticipated digital and print formats. It is also expected to recommend that the current Hymnal Revision Committee be retained to continue and complete its work.

# REBUILDING PUERTO RICO: One Roof at A Time



The June 16–23 team raised a metal roof on a home in Patillas, protecting the second floor from the rain for the first time since Hurricane Maria hit some eight months before.



Tom Vencuss led the team: Andrew Chung, Matthew Chung, Becky DeWeese, Jackie Landler, Pastor Christine Lindeberg, and Jill Wilson, all of the NYAC; and Kenny O'Brien, Jorge Ordonez, Gerard Piscitelli, and Matt Stranko from the New England Conference.

# “That Look:” An Immigration Story

(Posted to the NYAC website on June 22.)

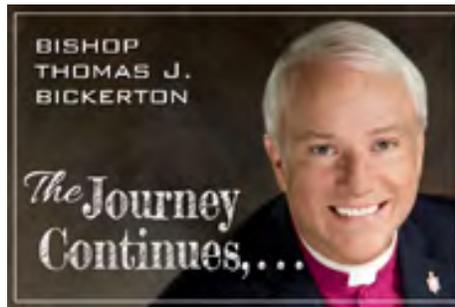
I will never forget that look. It was our first Christmas Day with our new daughter. Elizabeth was 11 months old and it was an exciting time to be a parent. Her eyes lit up with packages all around her. The breakfast casserole was in the oven and the coffee was tasting really good on that frigid winter morning. That’s when the doorbell rang. Who could it be interrupting our memorable day?

When I answered the door, standing in front of me was a young couple holding a baby wrapped up in a blanket. Their car was still running on the street. “We have no home,” the young man started, “and we’ve been sleeping in our car. We don’t have any food, and we have our baby.” The food we gave them seemed to please them, as did the night’s lodging. It seemed to be so very little in comparison with the need. Many years have passed, but I will never forget that look.

Over the years I have seen the exact same look in very different places. I have held babies who were dying of malaria and I have put my hand gently into an incubator in a neo-natal unit. I have watched parents as sons went off to college and daughters went off to war. I have been in stores when a mother has all of sudden lost her child, and I have watched as a father was told that the accident his son was in had been fatal. The settings have been very different but that look? It has been exactly the same.

If you are blessed to be a parent or grandparent you know what I am talking about. The bond between parent and child generates a desire to be connected and a passion to protect. You will do things for your child that you wouldn’t do for anyone else. It is your instinct to protect them from harm, shelter them from the storm, and see that their needs are met. Yet, when that privilege, that role, that responsibility is taken away from you it creates a helpless void that cannot be replaced. Take a parent away from their child and it creates that look.

I often say that I am nothing but a 12-year old in a 59-year old body. That is particularly true when I think about my parents. No matter how old I get, I am still their child, their little boy. Although my mother doesn’t cook any more, she still asks if I’m being fed. When I travel she wants me to call to make sure I have arrived safely. When I visit, she lights up and strokes my face. And when I leave, well, I will never forget that look. It’s in her eyes and in mine, too. She doesn’t ever want to be separated



from her child and her child feels exactly the same way.

You can probably guess by now that I am writing an article about the headline news this week about migrant parents being separated from their children at the borders. As has become the norm, it has been a week of finger pointing and accusations. The president says it’s the Democrats’ fault. Some Democrats say it’s the president’s fault. Some in the media say the government is using the situation to get tougher laws passed. Some in the government say the parents are using their children for drug smuggling or sex trafficking.

Regardless of where fingers are being pointed, this issue has, at its very core, a basic yet very clear reality—the need for a child to be with their parents and the need for parents to be with their children. There is no place for a child being used as a pawn in a massive chess game. There is no room for a parent to be separated from their offspring in the midst of emotional circumstances when their care is needed most. There is no room for actions that give rise to injustices that demean, denigrate, and use children and families for motives that are unfair and inhumane.

We should be proud that we are a part of a church that says in its Social Principles, *The United Methodist Church recognizes, embraces, and affirms all persons, regardless of country of origin, as members of the family of God. We urge society to “recognize the gifts, contributions, and struggles of those who are immigrants and to advocate for justice for all.”*

But we should be embarrassed if we are in any way associated with actions that separate parents and children and deny the basic right of a child to be cared for, embraced, and loved by the one(s) who brought them into the world. Do we really want to be associated with any actions that deny our children the physical and emotional care that they need?

There have been letters written this week that suggest you should call your senator or

sign onto a letter of complaint against the U.S. attorney general. You may have been urged to be a part of a rally or invited to participate in a march. Those are all good and necessary things.

But today, I want to urge you to do something else. Hug your daughter. Call your grandson. Sit in a park and watch a parent playing with their child. Pause at a little league baseball game and watch the parents as they undyingly root for their kid to get a hit. And, in the midst of all of that, give yourself just enough time to think about what it would feel like if all of a sudden you were violently removed from the privilege of taking care of your son or daughter. It won’t take too long to conjure up within you an uncomfortable feeling about what that separation might feel like. It won’t take too long for you to think to yourself how wrong it would be if it were done to you.

And then, as a result, do something about it. Today at [the Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew United Methodist](#) there is a new immigrant family who is being cared for and sheltered. [A mother and a child](#). Send them a card. Write the church a check. Show your support.

Today there are lawyers giving free assistance to immigrants who want to do things right so that they can live in a place that is safe and free. Lift up a prayer for them. Give a contribution to [JFON](#) through the conference center. Show your support.

Today there is a single parent in your community who is struggling with how to stay employed and care for their child at the same time. Offer your time. Buy them a bag of food. Show your support. The list is endless. When you take a story about an abuse happening to someone on the border of Texas and you apply that story to your life and give yourself just long enough to imagine what it might be like if it happened to you, then it becomes more than a story. It becomes a possibility. Make it more than just a story. Do something about it.

One day, in the midst of a story, the disciples asked Jesus a question, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” Jesus’ answer was simple, yet profound, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” (Matthew 25:44–45)

Realize what you have today and use that reality to take a stand that will settle for nothing less than the same standard for everyone in the human family. Use your privilege as a baseline

Continued on page 7

# SPSA Providing Sanctuary for Immigrant Mother

BY JOANNE S. UTLEY

In early June, the Church of St. Peter and St. Andrew UMC (SPSA) in Manhattan was asked to put into action a commitment they had made in January 2018 to become a sanctuary church.

Debora Barrios sought refuge in the church on June 4, bringing her 2½-year-old daughter with her. She was facing imminent deportation back to Guatemala.

During a news conference in the church sanctuary on June 21, Barrios said, "I ask for the opportunity to present my case to the judge and fight for my right to live with dignity and safety. But most importantly, I want my children to know their dreams."

"It is our firm belief at St. Paul and St. Andrew that God's abundant love and radical welcome are simply for all," said assistant pastor Rev. Lea Matthews to those gathered. "The U.S. is her home and separating her from her kids is inhumane, it's wrong and it is decidedly un-Christian."

According to Rev. James "K" Karpen, senior pastor at SPSA, Barrios came to the United States from her native Guatemala in 2005, when she was just 19. She fled her country in fear for her life and hoped to gain asylum here. After she missed a hearing because the notice went to the wrong address, her asylum case was closed. And an attorney that she worked with was unable to get it reopened. But Barrios remained in this country, married and had two children, who are American citizens. Her 10-year-old son, who is living with other family members, has been staying with his mother on the weekends while school is in session.

Immigration Control and Enforcement (ICE) was alerted to Barrios' whereabouts after a recent traffic stop. She was told to show up at ICE with a plane ticket to Guatemala, Karpen said. To avoid deportation and separation from her family, Barrios contacted the New Sanctuary Coalition (NSC) who made the request to SPSA. Typically, immigration authorities will not enter houses of worship to deport immigrants.

Matthews took that Saturday night call asking if the church would be willing to provide an immediate safe space for a family.

While there weren't many details at first, "when you get the call it all becomes very real," Matthews said, adding that the trustees had agreed to provide temporary shelter. "Yet none of us was willing to say no at that point," she added.

But there were many pieces to pull together and questions to answer for the Upper West Side



PHOTO BY CINTHYA SANTOS BRIONES

**Debora Barrios and her children, Kener and Bereneice, sit inside the apartment created for them to be in sanctuary at the Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew in Manhattan.**

church: Could they provide safety? Could they designate a space for the family? How could they incorporate a family into the building?

In the end, the congregation had just eight hours to turn a room in the church into an apartment for the family.

"It was utterly bizarre to be preparing this space, and then meet Debora and show her the space," said Matthews. "She took about two steps into the church and broke down crying . . . it was then that the profound weight of what we were

doing came on me. We want to do right by them . . . to get their story out. It's not just her fight, this is our community's fight."

SPSA calls itself a "[community of radical welcome](#)" and has a long history of fighting for justice for those living on the margins.

"We've been appalled by what was happening to the people we know, to our friends," said Karpen, referring to the many immigrant families who visit the church each week for

**Continued on page 9**

## "That Look:" An Immigration Story

**Continued from page 6**

of expectation. Everyone in the human family should be treated just the same.

Look around you today and take notice of all the ways you have been given freedom to raise your children, love your grandchildren, and provide a safe space for them to feel your love and protection. And then, standing in front of a mirror, imagine all of that being taken away from you.

You will never forget that look.

The Journey Continues, . . .

**Thomas J. Bickerton**  
Resident Bishop

*"Once considered the property of their parents, children are now acknowledged to be full human beings in their own right, but beings to whom adults and society in general have special obligations. . . . Moreover, children have the rights to food, shelter, clothing, health care, and emotional well-being as do adults, and these rights we affirm as theirs regardless of actions or inactions of their parents or guardians. In particular, children must be protected from economic, physical, emotional, and sexual exploitation and abuse."*

—The Social Principles  
of The United Methodist Church

# Making the Vision Plain & Church Sign Boards

Whenever I fly out of New York's LaGuardia Airport, a nondescript yellow sign at the end of the runway grabs my attention. It has only two words: "Recheck Compass." I learned that this sign is a reminder—and a warning—to the pilots that the metal in the framework piers beneath the airport can interfere with their compass-readings and cause calamitous damage. Hence they must double check the flight instrument before takeoff. It reminds me of a message of clarity God asked Prophet Habakkuk (2:2) to create for his community a few thousand years ago: "Make the vision plain, so the one who runs may read it . . ." (*Also, the words on the front page flag of this publication.*)

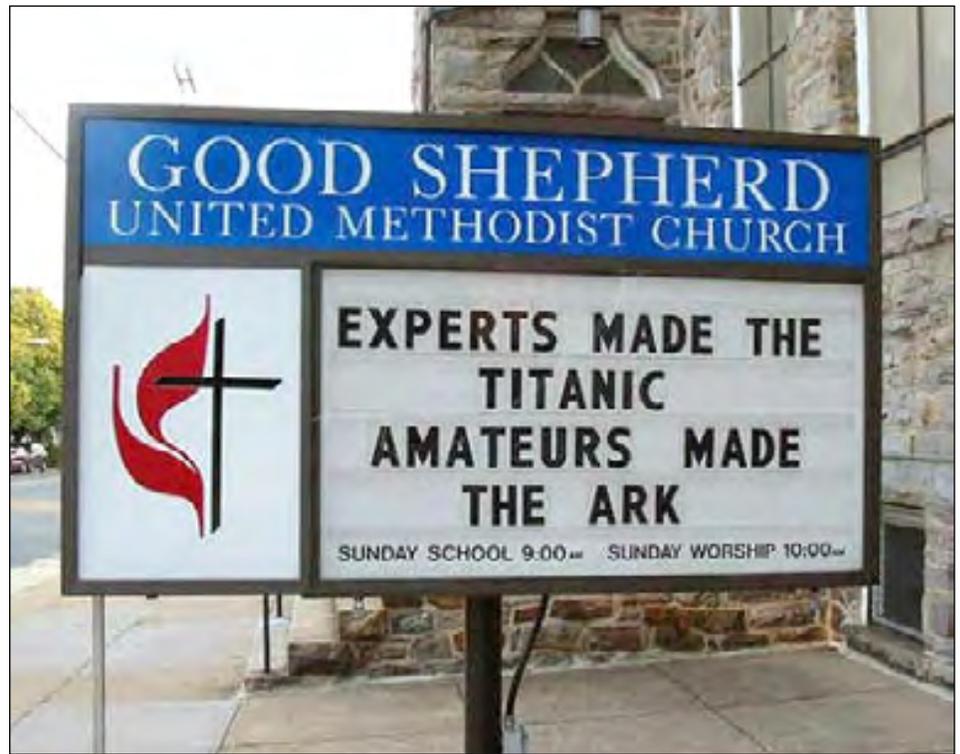
Reading catchy signs and attractive advertisements is almost a hobby with me. Sometimes, I capture them on my cellphone or scribble the words on the back of a receipt or a boarding pass. Recently, I developed an interest in reading church signs and their messages. Some were amusing, a few heart-warming; some downright cliché or condescending, and a few intellectually insulting. Some were like unmaintained websites with out-of-date events. Intermittently I conversed with parishioners about their church signs. They reasoned that it was a way to witness their faith to the passersby.

Years ago, at a Board of Ordained Ministry meeting held in Mount St. Alphonsus Retreat Center, one of the pastors shared that his inventive use of the church's sign board generated curiosity among the passersby, and occasionally brought them to worship services. Inspired by his innovative method, I replicated it in my church. When I was working on my sermon, I stumbled upon Frederick Buechner's famous statement on fear and faith: "Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith." I posted that message on the church's signboard.

The following day, I saw a teenager taking a picture of the sign on his way home from school. A month later, after three or four more different postings, the water meter reader stopped by the office, recited Buechner's quote, and said she'd started slowing down her car in order to read whenever a new sign was posted. It inspired me to carefully think about the words I put up every Saturday night. During the summer evenings, the dog walkers, the late night strollers, and neighborhood spectators would stop and thank me for the messages that often made them ponder and contemplate.

## In-house speak

Soon I learned that a church's sign stands at the opposite end of the spectrum from the



## COMMENTARY

church architecture. It demands attention for itself. Its verbal weight and stated nuance does not call for an immediate action. It rather creates curiosity and interest in the church, about its relevancy, and how it responds to tough times. I dawned on me that the language we use inside the church building is often anachronistic and archaic to the current generation. The church sign requires a different language, beyond the in-house language, as it speaks to those in the Kingdom of God, not just to the Body of Christ.

## Signs and communication

I came across a story about Rosser Reeves, the television advertising pioneer, who was having lunch with a colleague on a beautiful spring afternoon in Central Park. On their way back to the office, they encountered a man in the park begging for money with a handwritten sign: I AM BLIND.

Unfortunately, the man's cup contained only a few coins. Reeves paused and told his colleague, "I bet I can dramatically increase this man's intake by adding just four words to his sign." Reeves introduced himself to the man and offered to change the sign ever so slightly

to increase donations. The man agreed. Reeves took a marker and added four words. Almost immediately, a few people dropped coins into the man's cup. Some people soon stopped and talked to the man. Before long, the cup was running over with cash and the visually impaired man beamed. What four words did Reeves add? The updated sign now read: *It is springtime and I am blind.*

Clarity depends on contrast. We understand better when we see things in comparison with others. Contrast operates within and amplifies all aspects of persuasion. If we want to make sense to those outside the church we need to learn new categories and learn to speak their language. While we regularly seek contemporary relevance to God's message, we frequently fail to respect the cultural distance between our text and the context.

We need to look beyond the narrow perspectives of the present and in-house language, and set ourselves in the context of the larger community around us. Yesterday's lingo and the past primeval methodology will not be effective for today's context. It will only create nostalgia-driven signs such as, "Jesus is the reason, . . ." "Jesus is the answer," and many other question-begging phrases.

Churches operate in the spaces between the local and global, the explicit and implicit,

Continued on page 9

# Making the Vision Plain & Church Sign Boards

Continued from page 8

and the solid and the liquid: in the *soliquid*. Churches today are constantly challenged to develop a language that everyone can understand and evolve new ways to share the good news of the gospel. The gospel will always remain a foreign religion; its message is not merely a repetition of a past event. It requires both continuing reinterpretation and a creative response in each new situation.

We also need to bear in mind that interest in Christian faith and its deep spirituality has not been completely extinguished in the larger society. People around us frequently seek spiritual meaning for their life. A sign

that catches the attention will have to both respect the reader and must make sense. If it is traditional, it must be jazzed up with a little humor like the one I read: "Count your blessings. Recounts are okay, too."

## Communication as Being

Let us never forget that the sign people in the community read every day is what the Apostle Paul wrote two thousand years ago. Christian believers are the living "epistles to be read and known by all." Christ taught his followers how they ought to be human signs of the church: "Let your light so shine before men and women that they may see your good works

and glorify your Father in heaven."

We live in a world filled with turbulence and turmoil threatening to smother the church. May our efforts in drawing people to church not distract or dissipate those who are outside of the fold, with frivolous messages or fervent protectionism. A comedian once swore that he saw the following sign. "No trespassing. Violators will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. —Sisters of Mercy." Whoops!

*Dharmaraj, a retired elder in the NYAC, is president of the Inter-Ethnic Strategy Development Group.*

# SPSA Providing Sanctuary for Immigrant Mother

Continued from page 7

worship, feeding ministries, tutoring programs or to visit any of the organizations that are housed in the building. So members of the congregation began to work through the NSC more than a year ago to accompany immigrants to ICE and legal appointments. And they joined in the "Jericho Walks," public demonstrations for immigration reform that circle the ICE headquarters at Federal Plaza in lower Manhattan.

"We've been working to amplify the voices on the margins," said Karpen, who was arrested during a recent immigration protest. He noted that he's encountered parents from the tutoring program who are terrified with the actions of ICE under President Donald Trump's administration. Those relationships made the church decision to provide sanctuary an easy one.

"It was hard to ignore Jesus' commandment to love our neighbor," Karpen said. "At least we're doing something. We were feeling paralyzed by what's going on."

And according to Karpen, Barrios also wanted her voice to be heard, so the press conference was arranged at the church.

"Going public was her wish," he said. "She sees what's going on at the border. She's afraid when families are being split up all over the place."

The backdrop to the news conference was the president's directive to his administration to try to detain asylum-seeking families together. This seeming reversal of the "zero-tolerance" policy came after an enormous public and [denominational outcry](#) over the separation of some 2,300 children from their parents at the

southern border. Some of those children are now being housed in New York City, according to [media reports](#).

Barrios and her family are settling into their new "home" and have been embraced by the congregation and all the groups using the church building. Daughter Bereneice is attending the Spanish immersion preschool in the church and son Kener has explored every nook and cranny of the building.

"This is where SPSA shines . . . this is when 30 years of justice work pays off," Matthews said. After prayerful discernment, the church had decided "in theory that we would extend physical sanctuary," but they never expected it to be more than a temporary arrangement.

But the congregation has gotten on board with the new direction and has responded overwhelmingly to requests for volunteer teams to handle food, laundry, legal questions, prayer, and a rapid response team.

Matthews said she is working on a long-term plan that organizes volunteers in the church that will create sustainability and rely on lay

leadership for the sanctuary ministry. "We'd like to see the entire community working with family," she said.

"This congregation has been working for racial justice, and more recently how it intersects with the U.S. immigration policy," Matthews said. "This is active resistance . . . this is a physical call to follow Jesus."

Matthews recalled Barrios first visit to the "supermarket-style" food pantry in the church run by the [West Side Campaign Against Hunger](#). Barrios stood in middle of all the activity and seemed confused, Matthews said.

But then she looked at Matthews and said, "It's like a whole city in a church."

It's been particularly hard for the kids to say goodbye to each other each time the 10-year-old had to leave the church, Matthews noted. The separation from her son has also been difficult for Barrios. Barrios lamented to Matthews that she didn't get to go to his soccer games or his middle school graduation.

"She told me, 'I'm the mom who's always there,'" Matthews said.

# Translated Way Forward Coming July 30

Continued from page 4

The Judicial Council ruling also led the bishops to revise their call for the special General Conference. In a footnote, the court said that based on action at the 2016 General Conference, it expected the legislation to come from the Way Forward Commission not filtered through the Council of Bishops.

The amended call now says: "The purpose of this Special Session of the General Conference

shall be limited to receiving and acting upon a report from the Commission on a Way Forward based upon the recommendations of the Council of Bishops."

The commission has released a total of 10 videos in a series that they hope will inform the church on its processes and work done during the 18-month period of meetings and deliberations. The videos can be viewed on [YouTube](#) and can be downloaded for viewing offline.