The Rev. Frank Schaefer, the United Methodist pastor found guilty Nov. 18 of disobeying church teaching on same-gender unions, has until Dec. 19 to decide if he is able to uphold The United Methodist Church’s Book of Discipline “in its entirety” or surrender his credentials.

The all-clergy jury, which found Schaefer, pastor of Zion UMC in Lebanon, Pa., guilty of performing the same-gender wedding for his son Tim in 2007, and disobedience to the order and discipline of the United Methodist Church, said that if Schaefer violates any of the provisions of the Discipline during that 30-day period, he will immediately be asked to surrender his credentials.

During the 30-day period, Schaefer is to engage in reflection about his calling to the GLBTQ community. If he determines at the end of that period that he cannot uphold the Book of Discipline in whole, he is to turn in his credentials, thus removing himself from the pastoral office.

Schaefer’s district superintendent, the Rev. James Todd, will be responsible for supervising the implementation of the verdict. At the end of the 30-day period, Schaefer is to meet with the Eastern Pennsylvania Annual Conference Board of Ordained Ministry to report on the results of his period of discernment.

The counsel for the church, the Rev. Christopher Fisher, said that he believed the penalty to be “gracious” because it places the responsibility of determining the outcome ultimately upon Schaefer.
The birth of Christ happened a long time ago and nothing has been the same since, but every year people long for the experience of this birth for ourselves, a new birth of Christ in our hearts, and the wide-eyed recognition, in 2013, of God made flesh in a vulnerable blue-collar baby.

The Presence that was and is to come is meant to reveal what looks to us like a dead end may not be the end at all. If, as Carl Sandburg once said, “a baby is God’s opinion that the world should go on,” then perhaps the Christ child is God’s opinion that the world is not left to its own devices, that Caesars don’t carry the day, and that what looks to us like a dead end may not be the end at all.

The story of Christmas is that, when we couldn’t get what we wanted, we got God. God sent Jesus to be God-With-Us. Not to our devices, not to our wills, but to our presence. As Mandy Sayers writes in her piece, “The Presence that was and is to come is meant to reveal what looks to us like a dead end may not be the end at all.”

The Presence - a sense of Christ’s coming - is what we long for this Advent and Christmas. We yearn for an encounter at the manger to call our own, and in-breaking of wonder and awe at Incarnation even in an era of cynicism and pain.

The Prescence of wonder and awe at Incarnation even in an era of cynicism and pain.

**Correction:**

Correction: In the Rev. Hal Recinos’ column in the Nov. 13 UMConnection, Dr. Paul Rothman was misidentified. He is the dean of Johns Hopkins Medical School, not at Southern Methodist University.

**Volunteers in Mission training**

Register online from the United Methodist Volunteers in Mission (UMVIM) Leadership Training Seminar. Cost is $15. For more information, contact BWC VIM Coordinator, Dennis Schulte at dschulte423@comcast.net or 443-729-8772, or dreddcott@gmail.com; for registration, contact, Daylyn McCune, 443-254-2083 or darmccrae@aol.com.
M Any, if not most, sermons fade from memory by Sunday lunch, but people in Dallas still talk about one the Rev. William Holmes gave there 50 years ago, just after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

While he didn’t blame Dallas for the crime itself, Holmes unflinchingly described the city as an incubator for political extremism and incivility, the kind of place where things between good and evil are played out.

The sermon the CBS News anchored by Walter Cronkite and brought the young Methodist pastor death threats, forcing him and his family to go into hiding under police protection.

In short, all hell broke loose because of the tough love Holmes preached in Dallas two days after Kennedy’s killing there in November 1963.

Holmes is 84 now, retired in Maryland after a long, accomplished ministry career. He’s hard of hearing and walks with a cane, but he’s written books in recent years, and for the 50th anniversary of the JFK assassination he updated an 8,000-word memoir of the sermon controversy that he wrote for his grandparents.

“It’s always been an important memory for me,” he said.

Others, such as historian Stephen Fagin, call what happened with Holmes one of the more emotional and compelling subplots of the frenzied assassination aftermath.

“Dallas was blamed by many after the assassination for being a toxic environment, and Rev. Holmes really hit on that in his sermon,” said Fagin, associate curator of Dallas’ Sixth Floor Museum, which commemorates the JFK assassination story. “The fact that it achieved international notoriety … is something Holmes clearly didn’t ask for.”

On Nov. 22, 1963, Holmes, then 32, and his wife, Nancy, had joined the crowd at the Dallas Trade Mart, awaiting the motorcade containing the President. For what the couple had been waiting months for, Holmes was there for 24 years, preaching to a congregation that knew a prophetic word was needed, he wrote.

Holmes credits his wife – usually cautious on every matter regarding family health and safety – with insisting he preach at Northaven, where many worried an assassination might occur.

His joyful expectation turned to shock when they learned Kennedy had been shot as his motorcade passed through downtown Dallas. Driving home, they heard by radio bulletin that Kennedy had died at Parkland Hospital.

That same afternoon Holmes began working on the sermon he would give on Sunday, Nov. 24, at Northaven Methodist Church in the Dallas suburbs.

In his four-minute sermon, titled “One Thing Worse Than This,” he argued that Dallas couldn’t wash its hands, Pontius Pilate-like, of the tragedy that had occurred in its midst.

Good people of Dallas had for too long, he said, stood by silently, giving free reign to political extremists. His indictment culminated with Holmes describing how children in a fourth-grade classroom in North Dallas had cheered the news of Kennedy’s assassination.

“In the name of God, what kind of city have we become?” he said.

Holmes devoted the balance of the sermon to challenging Dallas residents to stand up to extremists, on the right and left, and create a more wholesome atmosphere for politics and governing.

“If Dallas rises from this monstrous moment in her history, a new city where different political opinions and the people who hold them are respected, then John Kennedy will not have died in vain,” Holmes said. “But that remains to be seen. Until then, the one thing worse than this assassination in our midst, is that we, the citizens of Dallas, should wash our hands and say, ‘We

By Sam Hodges
United Methodist News Service

Pastor calls on the power of the pulpit after JFK assassination

By Melissia Lauber
UMConnection Staff

Otterbein remembered for historic contributions to UMC

In Baltimore, the anniversary of his death day was observed in the churchyard of the church that bears his name and where Otterbein is buried. It was a day for remembrance, gratitude and “claiming the living hope given to us through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,” said Bishop Marcus Matthews, resident bishop of the Baltimore-Washington Conference.

“Our lives become the stars that others steer by,” said Matthews, reflecting on Otterbein’s legacy and the inheritance of all people of faith.

In those reflections, Matthews joined the Rev. Emora Brannum, chair of the conference’s Commission on Archives and History; the Rev. Donald Burgard, pastor of Old Otterbein; and the Rev. Wilson Shearer, who has a passion for church history, especially the history of the Evangelical United Brethren (EUB) Church.

These leaders, along with the congregation and several guests, worshiped together and then placed a wreath at Otterbein’s grave, which now has a froststone noting the 200th anniversary observance.

Shearer, wearing an EUJ preacher’s hat that belonged to his father, shared biographical information about William Otterbein. The Rev. said, citing Henry Boehm’s “Reminiscences,” was “tall, being six feet high, with a noble frame and a commanding appearance. He had a thoughtful, open countenance, full of benevolence, a dark blue eye that was very expressive. … He had a high forehead, a double chin, with a beautiful dimple in the center. His locks were grey, his nose pronounced.”

Otterbein was born in Dillingen, Germany, a twin and one of 10 children. He was ordained into the German Reformed Church in 1769 and three years later emmigrated to Lancaster, Pa., where he became a circuit rider, traveling the region, even coming into Maryland, to conduct class and meetings and open-air worship.

In 1785, during a camp meeting, Martin Boehm, a Mennonite preacher, told his salvation story. Otterbein rose from his seat, embraced Boehm and declared in his native German, “Wir sind bruder,” or “We are brethren.”

Otterbein was known as a preacher of great evangelistic zeal, even to the extent that he was barred from many church pulpits and he was forced to preach outdoors in groves of trees, barns or church yards. His sermons, some historians say, reminded the baptized that membership is more than just being on a church roster.

In 1784, Methodist Bishop Francis Asbury persuaded Otterbein to be pastor of a church in Baltimore. In 1785, at which church a Register of church members was buried, was built. It became “the mother church” of the United Brethren in Christ, and today is the oldest church sanctuary in continuous use in Baltimore and the only extant eighteenth century church building in Maryland.

Otterbein served as pastor of this church for 39 years. He died at 4:15 p.m. Wednesday, Nov. 17, 1831. He was 87.

Otterbein’s last words after his service ended were: “Jesus – Jesus – I die; but thou livest, and soon shall I live with thee – the conflict is over and past – I begin to feel an elevation from dross to pure gold delight, cross, and crown of peace, divine – lay my head on my pillow, and be still.”

A few months after his death, Asbury eulogized his friend. “Forty years I labored with the people of this man of God, towering majestic above his fellows in following, wisdom and grace, yet seeking to be known only of God and the people of God.”
I F PASTORS WANT to minister well, they must notminster alone. Draw the circles wider, they were told by Bishop Marcus Matthews at the Bishop’s Advent Day Apart for Clergy on Dec. 5. These wider circles are not just a good idea, they could change a person’s world. Although he is now president of Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School in New York, there was a time, McMickle said, when he was convinced he was heading to prison or an early grave. But then a man at his church reached into his life and gave him his first lesson in pastoral care that goes beyond the pastor. The man drove him around Chicago. They talked and stopped by the local prison. He asked McMickle over to the wall and told him, “If you don’t change the way you’re living, change the course of your life, next time I’ll be in this room.” “I can still feel the brick and mortar of Cook County jail in my hand,” McMickle told the more than 350 pastors from the Baltimore-Washington Conference who gathered at Catonsville UMC Dec. 6 for the Bishop’s Advent Day Apart. “This man was not my father, nor my pastor. He just was someone who understood that ministry is for all the people. Bishop Marcus Matthews suffered a death in his family and was unable to attend the Day Apart. But he had invited McMickle to share a word about pastoral care and how pastors need to develop an understanding of Ephesians 4, which calls for all the saints to be equipped for the ministry of the church. In understanding pastoral care, it’s helpful to think of three concentric circles, McMickle said. A concentric circle is like an impression in the water when an object is dropped in it. He said the bigger the object and the deeper the water, the bigger the circle. The first circle, he explained, represents pastors caring for their congregation with pastoral calls and counseling at the core. For McMickle and throughout members’ lives, most pastors, McMickle said, have convinced themselves that they are the only ones who can do this ministry. “They ignore Ephesians 4 as if their role was not being built up of the body of Christ to do the work of the ministry,” McMickle said. Stuck in this ego-driven perspective, pastors burn out and suffer health problems. “To practice this kind of ‘third-circle outreach’ by making a pledge to the Imagine No Malaria campaign, in the conference is seeing to raise pledges and gift of $2 a month by May 2014. The campaign, explained the Rev. David and Sylvia Simpson, is an attempt by The United Methodist Church to end deaths by malaria. This treatable disease claims the lives of a child ever 60 seconds. In Africa, it kills more than 665,000 people a year. Since The United Methodist Church has become involved in eradicating malaria, the death toll has been cut in half, saving nearly 1 million lives. In an Advent litany, the pastors were encouraged to “be light in the darkness,” and to make a personal pledge. They were also encouraged to invite their churches to give. In the Baltimore-Washington Conference, on any given Sunday, there are about 65,000 people in worship. If each of these people were to give $1 over three years, they could raise more than $1.9 million, David Simpson said. Information about the Imagine No Malaria Campaign can be found at www.bwcumc.org/ImagineNoMalaria. The closing words of the Advent litany cited an African proverb: “If you think you are too small to make a difference, try spending the night with a mosquito.”

To Go Deeper, Check out These Books:
*Caring Pastors, Caring People: Equipping Your Church for Pastoral Care* by Marvin McMickle
*The Externally Focused Church* by Eric Swanson and Rick Rusaw
*Fling Open the Doors* by Paul Nixon

**BWC clergy gather to worship at Bishop’s Advent Day Apart**

**By Roy White**

Two events in Kenya this past summer played a key role in Deaf United Methodist community. The Kenya Deaf Mission trip, and the 3rd Global Mission Missions Conference of the Deaf. To prepare for our mission, Dan Kenyon, Carrie White and I attended five planning meetings at Magnoly UMC of the in Pasadena, and in Oreme UMC. Together with eight others, we prepared two Bible stories that would be done in storytelling, drama and creative worship. The participating schools also brought band, choir, dance team and other community groups. The churches also brought donated school supplies and sport equipment as well as money from their home churches. All the items were packed in bags called “God Bags.” On July 24, we, along with five other team members from around the United States, checked in for an overnight stay at Comfort Inn near Dulles Airport for our final planning meeting.

After arriving in Africa, we rode in safari vans for a 4-hour drive north to Mero where Kaaga School for the Deaf and Nyerere School for the Deaf were checked in at the Methodist Bio-Intensive Agriculture Training Center in Mero for room and board. All the meals were prepared by the students and served in self-chosen plates and bowls.

Over the next four days, we divided into two teams to do a 2-day Bible storytelling and role-playing at school. The Rev. Dan Kenyon and Carrie’s team taught about Moses and the ten Commandments at Kaaga School for the Deaf with 266 students on Monday and Tuesday, I was with the second team teaching the Good Samaritan story at Nija Special School in Maua, about 45-minute drive away. This school has about 400 students, of which 35 are Deaf and 40 are normally hearing and physically disabled. On Wednesday and Thursday, the teams switched to other schools.

At both schools, the children eagerly introduced themselves by finger-logging and signing their names, all were very enthusiastic being involved in role-playing the Bible lessons.

The Mero celebrations were held at both schools on Friday, August 2. Team members presented God Bags, and the schools gave each team member a gift. Also, each school was given a chance to buy a commercial washing machine. (For years, the housemothers and students have done all their laundry by hand and lay their clothes on stone fences and big rocks to dry.) After getting to know so many of these children and teachers, leaving them was heartbreaking for all of us.

The next week, we returned to the Methodist Guest House in Nairobi to attend the 3rd Global Mission Missions Conference of the Deaf. The theme was “The right time is now, change and believe the good news.” (Mark 1:15)

About 400 people came from America, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Sri Lanka, South Korea, Nigeria, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Ghana and Burundi. During every presentation, sign language interpreting of different languages was done simultaneously. For example, as every presentation was voice interpreted in English, the interpreter for each country interprets in his or her native sign language. The participants from each country signed their songs for others to follow.

The program over the next three days included reports about education of the Deaf in Kenya and the need for a better Kenya Sign Language program. I gave a short presentation about the Deaf Fellowship Ministry of Emmanuel UMC while Dan led the first morning’s devotion with a brief sermon and also gave a talk about the United Methodist Congress of the Deaf, of which he is president.

This conference was wonderful in that Deaf people from many different countries shared their stories that may be useful to other Deaf ministries and missions. They had a great time signing songs and praising God with their hands. Every presentation was the same, yet different sign languages never prevented them from communicating with each other.

Returning to the States turned out to be challenging, yet God was with our team. The Aug. 9 departure was the first day that Nairobi airport opened, two days after a major fire occurred there. Our team was stuck there about eight hours; our flight was delayed four hours. We missed our connecting flight at Addis Abba, Ethiopia, by 40 minutes. We thought we would stay only one day but ended up staying two days due to miscommunications with the hotel, airlines, and airport staffs.

During our brief stay in Ethiopia, many of the team rode in buses taking advantage by visiting churches, the Bahai House of Prayer Museum, the Ethiopian National Museum, and other places. The whole TSA team was relieved when we finally returned home on Aug. 12 after a long flight.

*Roy White is a member of Emmanuel UMC in Beltsville, where he has chaired the Deaf Ministry Fellowship.*
“From this day forward,” he said, “I vow never to be silent, to change my mind. That’s how I see it right now. I’m an advocate for all lesbian, gay, transgender and bi-sexual people in the church. ’”

Tim Schaefer said. “I had seen others come out and at times was suicidal. After coming out to high school friends, Tim said, he thinks a friend’s mother called his dad to tell him of his suicidal thoughts. It was clearly that I could no longer be a silent supporter, but now I feel I have to be an advocate, an outspoken advocate for all homosexual, gay, transgender and bi-sexual people.

“Open yourselves to the unknown,” he said as he spoke of “exploring.” This is not always easy for older adults to do, but he said they urged them to “try something different. Work at it; it takes effort.” “Choose” and ‘Repack’ fit together, the bishop said, because there comes a time where you have to whistle down your options so life isn’t so cluttered, and then recap what is essential for the road (of life) ahead. Many people after retirement face such an experience, that of downsizing, he added.

“Make your possibilities (perhaps accented from the ‘reflect’ step) real by taking action.” Bishop Matthews noted that many Baby Boomers (those born 1946-1964) who are now beginning their retirements are very active, should not retire. By 2050, the population in the U.S. will have 72 million Boomers and, by 2061, the first of them will reach age 70. In his early years, the bishop said, he learned a good lesson from the shut-ins he visited each month with Commission: don’t assume you know what a person can do. He said he found out they wanted to give, not just receive, and he changed that church’s assumption that the older folks had little money and wouldn’t give to the church. “Let the people make the decision themselves,” he said. “Our task is to make disciples for Jesus Christ.” In a Q&A session, someone commented that the assumption in church is often that older people are not active.

“The majority of people in our churches are over 50,” the Bishop replied. “It’s up to us to determine how church values older adults. You’re the decision-makers. It’s up to you to say this is what we need to do so older adults can participate in the local church.”

Several in the audience shared what their churches were doing to involve older adults more actively in the life of the church, in effect “telling their story.” As one pointed out, Asbury UMC in downtown Washington brings a busload of seniors to both the Fall and Spring Older Adults Day Away.

Sandie King-Shaw noted that many of the churches have an Older Adults Day Away. “It’s a time for us (the churches) to get together,” she said. It would be a time to support each other and share ideas.

“I thank you for not waiting yesterday and also for this very moment, for your prayers. … I ask God to bless all the clergy, all the laity… Be prayer warriors for Jesus Christ,” the bishop charged the audience.

“I feel called to minister to everybody,” Schaefer said earlier in his testimony. “This experience has transformed me. I am now an advocate, a spokesperson for gays.” Schaefer said that he has embraced this role as a new calling from God.

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Tim Schaefer said that he was 99.9 percent sure his father would say “yes” to doing the wedding. “Saying ‘no’ would have been a bigger exclusion,” he said.

Frank Schaefer also took the stand, and, in a powerful moment, demanded the multi-colored stole signifying affirmation that he was in inclusion for homosexuals in the church. As he put on the stole, he made a covenant: “From this day forward,” he said, “I vow never to be silent, and to try to be a visible symbol. This is what I have to do from now on.”

Counsel for the church, the Rev. Christopher Fisher, asked Schaefer under cross examination if he was willing to repent of his actions.

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Volunteers staff the weekly services at the facility, attended the soul,” Axtell said.

The smiles and reactions of obvious joy from the children and the choir director, Peggy Manion. Children also played for the residents in the memory care unit

Some dozen churches are involved and offer services such as computer labs, a career closet, prayers, hot meals, a thrift store, and counseling services. It is a place where women faced with homelessness. It is a place where women are assured of their safety and well-being; it provides food and clothing for them, said the Rev. Debbie Tate.

The church, with a capacity of 99, had 136 in attendance, ranging from 87-year-old Hilda Hebron to 4-year-old Bridgette Colbert. Bishop Fisher told of preaching her first sermon at age 16 in Jessup at a Baptist Church. She focused on the many young people present and preached on forgiveness. She said the congregation that her only adopted son is not in the church and has piercings and tattoos. But, she said, it doesn’t matter what our young people look like, we have to learn to embrace them and not mold them into what we prefer them to be.

Rev. Helen Fleming.

When Fleming learned of the number of homeless veterans who were victims of rape and abuse, she decided it was time to act.

The Women’s Veterans Resource Center invites any veteran regardless of religious affiliation or none, to use the facility and services. Some dozen churches are involved and offer services such as computer labs, a career closet, prayers, hot meals, a thrift store, and counseling services.

In collaboration with the White House, other government and private veterans’ affairs offices, Douglas Memorial has hosted benefit conferences, job development sessions, social media training, job fairs and orientation training for pastors, Fleming said. “We’re in the middle of planning another collaborative effort with several veteran agencies to have a holiday celebration service with give-a-ways for the military families,” she said.

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Recognition and awards went to 37 students, from young Bridgette to a senior graduating with honors from Strayer University and freshman Chad Carden, the son of Pastor Gay Green-Carden, with a 4.0 in business administration from the University of Maryland, University College.

Church serves Thanksgiving dinner

GATHERSBURG – The United Methodist Women at Mt. Zion UMC (Brookeville) prepared Thanksgiving dinner and hosted the meal at the Montgomery Avenue Women’s Center on Thanksgiving Day. The Center provides support services to vulnerable women faced with homelessness. It is a place where women are assured of their safety and well-being, it provides food and clothing for them, said the Rev. Debbie Tate.

Sochi church seeks support

STAVROPOL, RUSSIA – The Rev. Irina Mitina, who attended last May’s session of the Baltimore-Washington Conference, is now serving as superintendent of the North Caucasian District. She invites United Methodists to support the church in Sochi, Russia, where the Winter Olympics will be held in February. Contact her at mitina191060@gmail.com.
The church has lost its way

By Jim Richards*

“I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling in which ye were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling: one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.” Ephesians 4:2-4

This distress from the people Paul is the glue that keeps the Church together as we “bear with one another in love.” But in bearing with one another, what do we do and how do we react when we have serious doctrinal disagreements?

This is where it gets difficult, especially where emotionally charged issues are involved. There is much pain in people’s lives and, believe me, I hear it every Sunday as we gather for worship and lift up our prayers.

People are looking for healing and hope and no matter who they are, they need to find that in the Church. The Gospel is powerful and transformational and when we enter into a relationship with God, through faith in Jesus Christ, we are changed. We don’t look at the world the way others do, because we have been given new spiritual eyes with which to see.

But there is a cost for this grace and mercy that we have been given so abundantly. The cost is repentance for the sin-filled lives we have lived and a directive to put aside our old self and seek to live lives of righteousness and holiness.

The United Methodist Church, in its Book of Discipline, states that “homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.” I believe that Scripture, our ultimate authority in these matters, clearly bears this out.

Some people within the Church, notcontent with what has been decided upon at General Conference, have now taken to defying church law. Pastors are performing same-sex marriages and recommending defiance of the stated beliefs of the denomination.

When “equippers of the saints” that Paul describes in Ephesians (e.g. apostles; prophets; evangelists; pastors; and teachers) espouse a doctrine that not only defy Scripture, but also defy the rules that the Church has established for itself to maintain unity and order, we are in trouble.

Unfortunately, this is where we are today.

In case you haven’t noticed, The United Methodist Church is in decline in the United States, but is growing in Africa. Methodism is in decline in the U.S. and our denomination continues to lose. We are losing faithful pastors, deeply committed disciples, and the chance to be in ministry with the 80 percent of the population living around us that does not regularly come to church to worship. It was a very specific prayer that led me from my role as a seminar director of admissions to the local church.

“God, take me out of my place of comfort and success. Give me a heart for hurting and broken people. Make me more prophetic.”

God answered this prayer in ways I could never have imagined when I was appointed the pastor of Mount Vernon Place UMC, a church in the heart of a heart. But I believe having conversations just outside the entrance of our parking garage when I arrive at 7 a.m. Two dozen people lay down their mats just outside the doors of our building each night. People are looking for healing and hope.

“Jim Richards is the lay leader of Thurmont UMC in Thurmont.

We stand at a crossroads

By Donna Claycomb-Sokol*

“Homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.” So says the United Methodist Book of Discipline. But this is exactly what Rev. Frank Schaefer, a pastor in Lebanon, Pa., was found guilty of not upholding the United Methodist Book of Discipline and performing the same-gender wedding of his son in Massachusetts in 2007 (see story, page 1). On the following day, the jury of 13 of his peers punished Rev. Schaefer with a 30-day suspension during which he must decide if he will embrace the entire Book of Discipline or surrender his credentials as a United Methodist minister.

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Walking through the store, it’s as if I am in a daze. Christmas music is being pumped through the speakers, while shoppers weave in and out of the racks, each of us engrossed in our shopping list. I have just a few more people to cross off my list, just a few more random gifts to put in a box with a bow, just a few more things to “finish” Christmas. My three-year-old holds my hand. Why Eden won’t go in the cart, I am not sure. But pushing the cart with one hand and gripping her with the other isn’t leaving me much space to get Christmas done. I let go for one second – to cross a name off the list – and she is gone. Keep watch.

That stuck out in my mind as we saw this flag that symbolized water, which was being offered by a migrant shelter in Altar, Mexico, a simple place with hot food and a warm place to sleep. When we arrived, no one was there yet for the night, so we waited. We had no idea what we should expect, but one of us got out a guitar and began to sing. Slowly, people began to arrive, including a young family, a teenager, and two brothers. They were exhausted and the language barrier made it difficult to strike up a conversation, but they joined us in song. Then we ate together, piecing together stories.

That night was filled with life and warmth, even though the realities of the dangers of the desert hung over us. Yes, my child. I see him now. Despite the chaos of Christmas, I see. Despite the list of Christmas I had before, I see. Despite the growing crowd, pushing, pressing, I see.

Reading Isaiah brought me back to that night at the migrant shelter. Isaiah’s litany is one of hope in the midst of death; the hope we have been waiting for in the midst of the death we have seen around us.

Preparing ourselves for Jesus’ arrival this Advent season is about opening our eyes to that hope at the same time it is about how we can nurture those blossoms God has planted in the wildernesses of this world. As that shelter on the border was, we can be waters breaking forth, offering life to people in their wilderness places.

PRAYER: Holy One, we reach out to you, seeking relief from the wildernesses around us. But we know we aren’t the only ones. Return us to your joy, and give us the courage to bring your realm to this place. Amen.