

A long time coming: Waiting for a sign

by [John R. Seraphine](#) in the [August 24, 2010](#) issue

My life in pastoral ministry had its share of ambiguities. At a couple of points I considered switching to a teaching ministry. Many times I felt that I was giving my best in the parish but that the results were underwhelming; many times I was disappointed in myself. It's not that I didn't love parish ministry. In the 37 years since my ordination, I have never served a congregation in which God didn't surround me with gifted and generous partners. I loved the congregations and the people I served.

In seminary I had dreamed of pews filled to overflowing as I preached with the conviction and the illumination afforded by my midnight-oil studies. As a pastor, I often longed to feel what Jesus must have felt when the crowds grew so enormous he had to hop in a boat to get some breathing room. Although years ago I'd begged God for a sure sign that I was called to this work, that sign had never materialized. As a result, I performed my ministry with a recurring doubt in my head: Am I truly intended and called for this work?

Then, during the last weeks before my retirement, I was granted a sign—the purest, most profound sign I've ever experienced. The first moment came during a farewell dinner for my wife and me. For weeks members of the congregation had been asking me how I felt about retiring, and I had no answer. I was caught up in responding to everyday duties and tying up loose ends.

But when I entered the church for the banquet, I felt the enormity of the impending change in my life, and I was not at all confident that I could handle the emotional impact of a congregation's well wishes for pastor and spouse.

Fortunately the evening included roasts and jokes and laughter. I received "Olympic medals" that marked such things as the record number of cars passing by the sanctuary window during one of my more long-winded sermons. My face ached with laughter as one skit depicted me giving a tedious and academic answer to a simple

question in passing about Adam and Eve.

In another skit, youngsters from the congregation delighted in interrupting my children's sermon with crazy questions. And the choir sang newly minted lyrics to "Thanks for the Memories."

There were other precious moments, but the glory of the evening continued unabated as we tidied up the fellowship hall late into the night. Women were cleaning up in the kitchen and running the vacuums while the men stacked tables and chairs. Our financial secretary and favorite Elvis impersonator turned to me and said, "Isn't this what it's all about?"

We looked at each other and knew that this was true. Something had happened to us through the years. No matter what we did together, it was beautiful, and much of it was fun—even setting up and cleaning up. We were in this work together.

The second significant moment came on Sunday morning. After I made the announcements, a man spoke up from the choir loft. He wanted to thank my wife and me for our ministry. He had been a part of the call committee and believed that the congregation had gotten a two-for-the-price-of-one deal. On a more personal note, he was thankful for the prayers and support after his first wife had died and for loving support as he celebrated his remarriage. He thanked God for all God had done for him through our church.

At this point I was in trouble. This little litany of thanks pushed me over the edge emotionally. I was at the baptismal font ready to lead the congregation in the Confession and Forgiveness of Sins, but I was coming undone.

In his letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul wrote that being "in Christ" causes us to see people in a new way. In Christ there is a new creation. For me the sign that congregational ministry had indeed been my calling was in being allowed, in this moment, to witness and live that new creation. Almost every member of the congregation was there that morning, even those who regularly found it difficult to get to worship. Each time I looked into someone's eyes I noticed a spark of shared recognition of this new creation. I knew how hard it was for many of them to cope. But here they were, celebrating their walk through difficult times—and the fact that we have walked on because we have walked together. Our life stories had been woven together in Christ. We knew each other's secrets and wounds, sins and

weaknesses—and it was OK, because Christ was there too, healing, encouraging and re-creating.

During that last Sunday at St. Luke's, the heavenly sign expressed itself in its most powerful form. During the farewell banquet, the Holy Spirit had taken our collective breath away only to breathe it back full of new life. Now it had become a whirlwind that was way beyond our control. By the time we got to the Eucharist there was no telling where it would all lead.

The people came forward. As I served the bread, each face I looked into shone with the glory of God. As trained astronomers find echoes and ripples of the Big Bang in the universe, so do communicants and pastor feel the echoes and ripples of the Last Supper of Christ passing between them. They experience it as they share all that they are with each other and place it all in the tender hands of God.

There is no easy formula or shortcut for genuine ministry. Programs and ideas come and go. Technologies sparkle and grab our attention for a time. But in the end, one thing matters and endures—God's love in Jesus Christ. The Christian church is this love at work, the movement on earth that springs from the Spirit's breath and strives to gather all people so that they might live forgiven.

My sign from God had been in the making for 37 years. These people taking the body of Christ from my hands—these people and I had been living as that same body. We had learned together that because we trust the love of God we can face down the assaults of Satan. We do not have to flinch when we confront the absurdity of cancer, indignities on the job, the stabbing pain of the death of someone we love or the enduring, numbing pain of divorce, rejection or loneliness.

Together we have stared down demons and refused to allow differences of opinion to scatter or discourage us. We recognize fearmongering for the evil it is and renounce it. We are gathered by God and have allowed God to hold us. As we've endured and let Christ bind us together, God has made us ever stronger. This is the truth that was breaking out in front of us in our singing, sighing, laughter and applause, silence and tears.

At the end of the service, after the members of the church had filed out, sharing last tearful exchanges, I noticed a visiting couple bundling up an infant child at the rear of the sanctuary. I greeted them and apologized for all the weeping, which I thought must have seemed bizarre to them. They responded, "This is the way every

Eucharist should be."

I had my sign—God had made me a full partner in the excellent absurdity of ministry. Congregational ministry was the right calling for me. I had received a sure sign—the Lord grabbed me and planted me deeply in a life in which I could truly serve and belong.