

A congregation's commitment to live out "We do"

We say these words a lot. Lately I've noticed what it looks like when we follow through.

by [Kimberly Knowle-Zeller](#) in the [January 1, 2020](#) issue



FatCamera / E+ / Getty

An hour before a recent wedding, as I grabbed my microphone to get ready for a sound check, I greeted a family who attended the church I served. Leaning in for a hug, I said, "It's so good to see you."

"You too! You get to marry Alex and Meaghan. And today is Charlotte's baptismal anniversary, right?"

It took me a minute before I responded. "Yes, it is."

It was my four-year-old daughter's baptismal anniversary—and I had forgotten it. But a member of the congregation who had witnessed her baptism remembered. She had been among those who responded "We do" when the congregation was asked, "People of God, do you promise to support Charlotte and pray for her in her new life in Christ?" I had not thought about my daughter's baptism that day at all. I silently said a prayer of thanks for this woman who was bearing witness to God's love in my daughter's life.

With two children under five, I need others to proclaim "We do" through their actions. When I can't wrangle two children in the pews, a friend who offers to color with my daughter shows us both that we're not alone. When my children receive birthday cards and sincere questions about how they're doing, they know there are people who care for them. If their faith wavers, they'll know people who are ready to listen. Perhaps, if they ever turn their back on the church, they'll remember the faces, welcome, and notes of encouragement they once received. They'll know there are people who made a promise to be with them in the life of faith. The promise of "We do" will be known in the people who've embraced them.

Those two words *We do* may be the heart of what it means to be in Christian community. Baptisms, weddings, confirmations, and ordinations all involve promises of "We do" or "We will." It can easily be a rote response. But our "We do" binds us to the larger community and give us an opportunity to be God's hands and feet in this world.

At my ordination, I answered as the bishop asked me questions about preaching, teaching, and living faithfully. After each question, I answered, "I will." Near the end of the service, members of the congregation were asked if they would "pray, help, and honor me for my work's sake, and in all things strive to live together in the peace and unity of Christ." Looking out at the congregation, I saw the faces of many who had witnessed my life in Christ—people who were present at my baptism and confirmation, who took seriously their words of "We do." A huge smile crossed my face as I heard the congregation say those two words again.

At my wedding, the pastor turned to the congregation to ask: "Will all of you, family and friends gathered this day, by God's grace, uphold and care for Stephen and Kim in their life together?" That "We will" has gone with us in our marriage, expressed in friends offering prayers for us, providing food when we're sick, watching our children, and encouraging us in our calls.

The promises we make are spoken as a group, but we often experience the meaning of the promises by way of individuals, like the woman who remembered Charlotte's baptism. Or like a woman I know named Teresa, who held the hand of her friend, Fern, as she lay dying.

Fern and Teresa attended church together, and Fern was present at Teresa's baptism. I can picture her offering her support and prayers, welcoming Teresa into Christian community. Fern could never have imagined that in her final days, she'd be held by Teresa, now grown up and living out her calling as a nurse. Teresa, who benefited from Fern's "We do," was able to offer those same words back to Fern in acts of loving care. Four hours after her shift ended, Teresa remained at Fern's side. Throughout the night, as Fern moved in and out of consciousness, her friend and nurse, Teresa, held her hand.

God's promises take flesh across time and space in a community that lives out the meaning of "We do," putting faith in action: keeping vigil, offering a hand in silence, and providing presence when no words are left.

The next time I attend a baptism, confirmation, or wedding, my voice will be strong as I join with others saying, "We do." My words will take shape in phone calls, text messages, cards, prayers, and donations of food. I know what those words mean, thanks to those who've made the same promise on my behalf.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "The power of 'We do.'"