



Carstairs-Bancroft United Church

February 2, 2021

**DAILY ENCOURAGEMENT
DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

By Rev. Maria Szabo Berces



Source: Our Daily Bread

Beloved Carstairs Bancroft United Church Members,

During my study leave of last week I attended a webinar organized by the continuous education platform of our denomination. The three-session course's title is "*Thriving Churches*". The authors examine what are the characteristics of congregations that have been flourishing before, and even during the pandemic.

What was striking among their findings is that numbers don't belong to those features. Even a small congregation can make a huge difference in her community.

The Our Daily Bread meditation below supports this conclusion. What matters both in this devotion and in the webinar is that the people of the thriving faith communities have been continuously eager to learn, to grow in their faith; moreover to put their faith into practice. They do their best to develop a supporting environment for this learning by personal interactions and joint events.

Of course, this is just one of the numerous practical encounters that folks visiting these congregations may come across. A remark from one of the webinar leaders was very memorable for me: "*Who they were determined what they do; and that's the most important characteristic.*"

When we think about who we are at Carstairs Bancroft United Church, we may know that we are beloved children of God. We have heard several times that we were so valuable and precious in the Holy One's eyes that "**... he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.**" (John 3:16)

However, this information by itself doesn't necessarily help when storms of life hit us. As Jesus put it in his Sermon on the Mount: "**Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock.**" (Matthew 7:24-25)

We have opportunity "*to hear*" the reassuring words of God's love towards us as we gather for worship and for other conversations and studies. We are told what the Almighty's plans are for us: "**For I know the plans I have for you,**" declares the Lord, "**plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.**" (Jeremiah 29:11) A future which includes even life beyond death.

As "*the hand of the Lord our God is on us*" (Ezra 7:28) through these promises, we are encouraged to learn more about God's guidance and instructions, and to support one another as we strive to put them into practice. With this we can become individuals and a faith community whose lives and actions have been built on a solid foundation, and whose existence may point towards the Holy One's loving and nurturing presence in this world and the next.

Grace and Peace to You All,

Rev. Maria



Ripple Effect

Because the hand of the Lord my God was on me, I took courage and gathered leaders from Israel to go up with me.

Ezra 7:28

READ EZRA 8:15–21

The little Bible college in northern Ghana didn't look impressive—just a tin-roofed cinder-block building and a handful of students. Yet Bob Hayes poured his life into those students. He gave them leadership roles and encouraged them to preach and teach, despite their occasional reluctance. Bob passed away years ago, but dozens of thriving churches, schools, and two additional Bible institutes have sprung up across Ghana—all started by graduates of that humble school.

During the reign of King Artaxerxes (465-424 BC), Ezra the scribe assembled a band of Jewish exiles to return to Jerusalem. But Ezra found no Levites among them (Ezra 8:15). He needed Levites to serve as priests. So he commissioned leaders to “bring attendants to us for the house of our God” (v. 17). They did so (vv. 18-20), and Ezra led them all in fasting and prayer (v. 21).

Ezra's name means “helper,” a characteristic that resides at the heart of good leadership. Under Ezra's prayerful guidance, he and his protégés would lead a spiritual awakening in Jerusalem (see chapters 9-10). All they had needed was a little encouragement and wise direction.

That's how God's church works too. As good mentors encourage and build us up, we learn to do the same for others. Such an influence will reach far beyond our lifetime. Work done faithfully for God stretches into eternity. – By **Tim Gustafson**

REFLECT & PRAY

Father, show me someone I can mentor. Amen.

Who is your primary spiritual mentor? (If you don't have one, who might you ask to mentor you?) Why is mentoring in Christ something vital for you to receive and extend to others?

SCRIPTURE INSIGHT

King Artaxerxes decreed that any exiled Israelites who wanted to return to their homeland could do so. Included in the king's proclamation were priests and Levites (Ezra 7:13). So Ezra began leading a group back to Jerusalem. While traveling, however, he discovered that no Levites were part of the group (8:15). Why did Ezra need Levites? Because Artaxerxes had given Ezra permission to “appoint magistrates and judges to administer justice to all the people of Trans-Euphrates—all who know the laws of your God” (7:25). And Ezra was to teach those who didn't know the laws. This required that Levites be part of the group that returned. They served as officers and judges (1 Chronicles 26:29) and were the ones who taught the law (2 Chronicles 35:3). After Ezra sent for Levites to join them, God's “gracious hand” brought them home to Jerusalem (Ezra 8:18, 31-32). – By **J.R. Hudberg**

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