

## My ALP Experience

By Rick Accord, Davis Memorial Presbyterian Church, Gassaway

*This is part of a series highlighting PWV's Authorized Lay Preacher/Commissioned Ruling Elder Program. In September, we begin a new set of Presby Prep courses, which are prerequisites for this program. [Click here](#) for more information about Presby Prep. Is God tugging at your heart to participate? Presby Prep is a great way to learn more.*

First of all, I never felt I was called to be an ALP. I was quite clear and up front with the screening committee about this. I was looking forward to the education; I have always enjoyed learning, and I figured being more biblically literate wouldn't hurt as a pastor's spouse. And being a member of a small church, I thought I might be able to satisfy a need for small churches in my area who were temporarily without pastoral leadership or, as is more often the case, will never have the financial means to support a full-time minister. But this was not a call, simply another service I could provide as I tried to find my niche within the larger church.

So I started the training, and it lived up to all my expectations. I learned a lot; I got to know a lot of people, each with their own reasons for being in the program but all with a strong and earnest devotion to the church and God; I grew spiritually, and each week, I became more committed to the program and the process. That is until it was time to prepare and deliver my first sermon.

I didn't ever seriously consider dropping out of the program, but I did see the sermon as an obstacle to be overcome so I could get back to the parts of the program I enjoyed. We had some training in sermon resources, online and more traditional, and a couple of guest lecturers who gave us some insight into how they prepared sermons. And so I prepared my first sermon. It was a struggle, but the one thing that surprised me is that, as I explored the text, I began to make connections between events in my life and the events in the text, so my first sermon about the visitation of the Wise Men at the birth of Jesus started off with a remembrance of the time I took a scout troop to a (non-religious) Christmas program at a local college planetarium.

We did a couple more sermons during the training, which were not as memorable to me, but I do remember that as I was getting near the end of the program, I was thinking that I could probably put a lot of what I had learned to use teaching the adult Sunday School class in my home church and also that I was glad I wouldn't have to do any more sermons. That's when I got the call from Grace Anne Barker of Upper Glade Presbyterian Church. They needed a guest preacher for Sunday a few weeks down the road; would I be available? I quickly explained that I



had not yet finished my training and I wasn't sure I was ready to go public. But Grace Anne said she didn't think that would be a problem.

I thought that this was a small church a good distance from where I live and, as far as I knew, no one from that church knew anyone from my home church, so I could go preach and if it didn't go well, it would be a little embarrassing but I could leave and not have to face any of these people again and word would probably never get back to my congregation. So I prepared my fourth sermon, a text about King David, how God was always intervening in David's life and David's genius for listening to God and then changing his life based on what he was hearing.

At the time, my life was in transition. I was switching jobs, something I was looking forward to but that almost didn't happen because I had been on the verge of calling and cancelling the job interview because I didn't feel I was qualified for the position. That's when God intervened. It was a small thing, nothing too grand – a single white flower growing among the broken and twisted roots of a row of trees that had been taken down just a few days earlier. To anyone else, it would probably have scarcely been noticed, an oddity at best. But to me, it was God's message to get over myself and get to that interview. I did, and I got the job. And this was part of my message that Sunday, how God is always giving us pointers to God's direction for our lives if only we would look at them.

The sermon seemed to go well, and I agreed to come back and preach again in four weeks. This was 16 years ago. Since then, I have preached at more than 20 churches, to as few as two people and as many as 100, on live radio, for a convention of the local Farm Bureau, even a few times at my home church, which is always the hardest. And each time I do it, I am amazed that, as a person with no particular talent for public speaking, I am still able to prepare and deliver a sermon, one that, with God's help, seems to resonate.

I retired from my full-time profession at Glenville State College last July, and I gave some thought to retiring from supply preaching as well, but it was about that time that John Koerner called on behalf of the Ministry Committee, asking if I would be willing to do communion services at some small churches that had not been able to observe this sacrament in a while because there was no one to preside at the table. Again, I'm not sure if I am qualified, having many of the same qualms I had when I gave that first sermon, but I have learned over the years that God doesn't always ask you if you're ready, God only asks if you are willing. Maybe God is not done with me yet.