

Dear Friends in Christ,

Thank you for the recognition of the 35th anniversary of my ordination. 35 years ago, I was in my first month of serving as a pastor. Everything was new to me. The job description was pretty straightforward: lead worship and preach the Gospel of Jesus; teach the faith and care for people; baptize, marry, and bury; oversee the administration of the congregation; and so on. Seminary had given me lots of good ideas about pastoral ministry, but I still had lots to learn. 35 years of serving 3 great congregations has taught me a lot. I have learned a lot from faithful church members and I have learned a lot from my own mistakes.

I hope that I have served with some of the same joy and enthusiasm that my pastor displayed in his ministry. I hope that I have preached and taught in a way that has communicated the joy and the wonder of the good news of Jesus. And I hope that I will continue to learn more about following and serving Jesus.

The ministry of the Word is a great privilege and joy. It is also a heavy burden. Every church I have served has struggled with declining membership and participation. At times it feels like nothing we do really matters. But I am still convinced that the Gospel is the power to save. And I feel a heavy responsibility to deliver it faithfully.

It is tempting to judge faithfulness by the numbers, but the Kingdom of God has never been about numbers and worldly success. Jesus told parables like the Parable of the Sower to say that the Kingdom of God comes stealthily and mysteriously. The Kingdom of God came through the cross which was judged by the world to be a complete failure. We can have hope that even when it seems that our efforts are not all that successful, the Word of God still works like seeds hidden in the soil.

Yours in Christ, Phil Nielsen