

## ASP Commissioning Sunday 2018

In the summer of 1978,  
 a couple station wagons pulled out of the parking lot of Greenfield Hill  
 Congregational Church,  
 with five adults and ten kids (somehow) packed into them,  
 headed down to Kentucky  
 to be part of a great new mission they'd heard about  
 called the Appalachia Service Project.  
 The trip didn't go entirely smoothly, as I understand it,  
 one of the station wagons only made it to Delaware,  
 and, once they reached Kentucky, the work turned out to be seriously hard –  
 this was no church camp experience with volleyball every afternoon,  
 this was rebuilding Appalachia, one home at a time.

But something happened there  
 and that little group that went,  
 which included Betsy Russell Milicia,  
 who is here today to be commissioned again,  
 that little group came back saying  
*oh yeah, we're going back next summer..*

**This** summer marks the 40th anniversary  
 of that first trip.

Forty years later, there will be another bunch of teenagers and adults  
 rolling out of Fairfield on the last Saturday in June and heading south.  
 Only this time it's going to take six buses and a small fleet of vans.  
 And when we come back, nine days later,  
 I'll hear from them the same thing that was heard 40 summers ago:  
*Oh yeah, I'm going back next summer.*  
 Which is, by the way,  
 the same thing I heard when I came to this church 29 years ago.  
*Do you whatever want with everything else,* the teens told me,

*but we ARE going back to ASP next summer.*

The ASP trip is a home repair *mission* trip – it's a service trip, it's a trip on which we work, and work hard. we pick up hammers and circular saws and do the work of sheltering and caring that Christ asked us to do.

This is a trip in which we do give to the least of these, Christ's brothers and sisters,

just like the scripture Dan read tells us to do.

This is a trip on which we pour ourselves out for those who hunger and thirst.

But here's the truth – here's the secret – and it's not much of a secret anymore:

Nothing works for 40 years for thousands of people unless there's as much **receiving** as giving going on.

You don't go from two station wagons to buses and vans if everyone every summer is having a miserable experience thwacking their thumbs with hammers and getting sunburned on tin roofs.

We are good people, but we're not saints – there must be something else going on.

There is.

Just ask Chuck Ellis, Mike Ruble and Mike Howard, whose combined years of service on this trip number well over 50.

Ask Katie Hoder, heading back for her second year as a leader, after 4 years as a youth participant.

Ask Kate Fitzpatrick, a teacher at Fairfield Woods, who went as a teen and has come back to make sure other teens get what she received.

Or Nick Caruso, who since he was 15, 13 years ago, has shown up every summer – for the past 6 years with his now-wife Kelly -- we came close to writing an ASP participation clause into their wedding vows last fall.

Yeah, there must be something else going on here.

And that something, that truth is this:

that on ASP, we are fed.  
Our spirits are fed.

I had Dan read the powerful words of Matthew 25 to us just now.  
I was hungry and you gave me food, said Jesus,  
I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink.  
I had Dan read it because that scripture is why we go to Appalachia:  
We go because Christ himself calls out to us in the voices of those in need.

But spiritually, in a soul-deep way,  
**we** are thirsting. **We** are hungering.

God **creates** us that way –  
God makes us with big empty spaces inside us  
that need to be filled,  
big empty holes into which something has to be poured,  
huge hungers that must be fed.

We hunger to have our lives make a difference  
and to be needed  
We hunger to be remembered when we have moved on  
We are hungry to love and to be loved  
for companionship with one another and with God;  
we hunger to feel God's nearness  
and to know that God has a purpose for our lives.  
God makes us this way  
so that our yearning to be fed  
takes us to the places where we will be fed.  
Our hungering takes us to the places where God's Spirit will fill our needy souls.

A great preacher once said that your calling,  
the place where you are supposed to be,  
is where your deep hungers meet the world's great need.  
And at ASP,

**our** hungers meet the **world's** need.  
 Our yearning to make a difference  
 to love and to be loved  
 to feel God's nearness  
 meets the need of a family somewhere  
 to be sheltered and cared for  
 to have the rain kept away  
 and the cold kept at bay  
 to have a room for the children built.  
 And so it is that in the hollers of West Virginia,  
 our giving becomes gain  
 and our hungering souls are filled.

After last year's trip, one of our teens sent an email to me that said:  
 "Alida, I was given so much more than I gave.  
 I had no idea that while helping someone else, they would help me too."

Another teen wrote this to me:  
 "I had lost God out of my life, but I found him again this week.  
 I found him again this week in the faces of the family I worked for."

Is it selfish, then, to go again and again on a mission trip where our souls are fed?

No. It's why God made us with empty spaces within,  
 and then set us free in this world to discover that the only way to be fed is to feed  
 others.

To learn for ourselves that the only true quenching of the soul's thirst is by  
 offering the cup of kindness.

"I was hungry and you gave me food," Christ says to us.  
 And year after year, it is we who say to the people of Appalachia:  
 we were hungry —  
 whether we knew it or not —

we were hungry  
and you gave us food.  
Amen.