

# LIGHT OF A LIFE

■ Surrounded by congregation's care in her last months, Indiana pastor showed power of love is stronger than darkness



Darcy Holsopple Photography

**Heidi Siemens-Rhodes, a member of the pastoral team at Assembly Mennonite Church in Goshen, died June 24 after a nine-month battle with cancer. She is pictured with her husband, Mitch, and sons, from left, Theo, Ira and Adam.**

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**G**OSHEN, Ind. — In her final days, her sense of time gone, Heidi Siemens-Rhodes woke up asking if it was Sunday.

“She just really wanted to go to church,” Heidi’s mother, Jan Siemens, said. “People were amazed that she would come [toward the end]. It didn’t matter to her. She wanted to be at church.”

Siemens found it fitting that she died on a Sunday, June 24. It was nine months after she was diagnosed with cancer. It was also her 38th birthday.

Siemens, along with Heidi’s husband, Mitch Siemens-

Rhodes, and their three boys — Theo, 9, Adam, 6, and Ira, 2 — were with her in their home. Earlier in the day, members of Assembly Mennonite Church in Goshen, where she served on the pastoral team, stood outside her window singing, candles in hand.

Candles appeared in another vigil held shortly after the diagnosis. Later on, friends took or found photos of candles and posted them to Facebook, tagging Heidi’s name, sometimes with a message of support. Her small group made a candle together that burned at her funeral.

Candles were a natural symbol of the witness of Heidi’s life.

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# Pastor's final witness inspires community of support

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"She showed us light is ultimately stronger than darkness," said Karl Shelly, who served on Assembly's pastoral team with her. "This darkness is awful, but it's not all there is."

Throughout the nine months Heidi lived with her diagnosis, congregations, friends, family, neighbors and strangers flocked to her story.

When she could no longer minister to her congregation the way she had at Assembly, her congregation found her online. She kept a journal on CaringBridge, a support site for people in health crises. By the end there were more than 100,000 visits to her blog, an average of nearly 300 per day. People have left more than 2,100 comments on the site's guestbook.

"People would tell me, 'That's not typical, you know,'" Siemens said. "The response was just so incredible."

"It's overwhelming," Mitch said. "The support is so genuine."

The blog took many shapes. Heidi was a minister. She was an example of what dying well could look like. She could instantly update her friends around the world about her illness — and it was a way for them to stand beside her from afar.

Before the blog and the diagnosis, Heidi was the more traditional kind of minister at Assembly.

When Heidi and her family found out last Sept. 23 that she'd been feeling sick because of tumors in her brain — diagnosed a few days later as incurable metastatic melanoma — she knew the church needed to be told. She consulted Mitch.

"Your whole world just comes crashing down," he said. "We just didn't know what to do, how to express this."



Jim Kaufmann

**Edgar Metzler anoints Heidi Siemens-Rhodes at Assembly Mennonite Church in Goshen, Ind, following an announcement that tumors were found in her brain. Assembly minister Carmen Horst looks on.**

They knew they wouldn't be able to get through even the announcement by themselves.

They asked Shelly and another member of the pastoral staff, Carmen Horst, to read a letter from Heidi to the church. Shelly remembers gasps from the congregation. Then there was a time for anointing Heidi.

The anointing began a process, Shelly said, in which Heidi tried to answer: How does this become something we bring to God?

"In the midst of this anguish," Shelly said, "she started ministering to us in a very profound way."

Mitch said, "In a way, that kind of kick-started the process. She decided to be very open with this. And I followed her lead. If you don't let the world know your pain, they are less likely to be able to respond."

## Overwhelming response

Assembly's members didn't waste any time beginning the many acts of kindness and sup-

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— Karl Shelly

port they would show the Siemens-Rhodes family over the next year.

Offers to help came, Mitch said, "before we were even out of the worship space."

So many offers came that one couple, Patrick and Stacey Farran, were appointed volunteer coordinators. Patrick Farran is a project manager by trade and stepped into gear, posting a survey, where people could volunteer for various roles, on Heidi's CaringBridge journal.

"Over 130 responded," he said. "It was just overwhelming."

They closed the survey in less than a week, having gathered more than enough help.

The needs of the family were met one after the other as pleas were announced digitally and responses came physically, in the form of meals, gifts, plant care, child care, housework, rides to the airport, errand-running and prayer.

"[The Farrans were] asking us for things we would need before we knew we needed it," Mitch

said.

Patrick said, "I can't tell you the number of times Stacey and I were brought to tears reading the responses. People were so generous."

Mitch and Heidi slowly realized they could let go of much more than they planned, knowing people were there to help.

Patrick said people told him, "Thank goodness you're doing this. I feel so helpless."

Many of the gifts were unexpected and extraordinary. Children from the church folded cranes for Heidi. Friends from college put together a scrapbook. Once when she needed medicine from Elkhart, within two minutes of Patrick putting out the request, someone volunteered to pick it up. One weekend a friend financed a trip to Chicago for the whole family.

Heidi wanted to write personalized thank-you notes to each helper.

"It would take three or four full days to sit down and thank all the people who helped us," Mitch said. She didn't have three or four days to spare.

"All of that time was focused on what we could do as a family," Siemens said.

Heidi and her mother made a final pilgrimage together to Minnesota. The entire family traveled to Fresno, Calif., for a Siemens family reunion. They took her to Lake Michigan 11 days before she died.

"She hung onto the things she really wanted to do," Siemens said. And for the most part they got them done — in large part because of the support they received from near and far.

Heidi could only thank them through her blog. But many responded that the gift of words in each of her 90-plus eloquent, honest, sermon-esque blog posts were thanks enough.

## Avenue to preach

"She really liked to preach," Shelly said. "This became her avenue to preach. People across the globe were reading this thing."

He said while her most obvious sadness was "leaving her children and the love of her life," leaving her congregation and calling as a minister wasn't far behind.

Siemens said Heidi had a passion for ministry and a determination to do as much as she could until the end.

"Heidi led this dance through the nine-month journey," she said.

"She didn't shy away from showing up and talking about it," Shelly said. "It gave us all permission to enter this conversation together. She was literally dying in front of us for nine months."

Shelly said the ministerial team told her: "First you need to take care of your health. But we think the most powerful thing you're doing is on that blog."

Mitch said she wanted to be upbeat in the blog.

"She was expressing the positive amidst all the anguish," he said. "She never expressed a fear of dying. It was just the pain of separation that would lead to so many tears that we shared."

She was honest and open about the pain, too, her mother said.

"There were a number of times where it was so clear that she was so incredibly sad," Siemens said. "Not anger, just lament for the life she wouldn't live."

This was perhaps most evident in an early post called, "The Worst News Ever," where she announced they had learned the disease was not curable. Heidi closed with, "Exhausted. Devastated. Crushed. Fearful. And yet . . . the mightiest word is Love."

"It didn't start with the blog," Siemens said. "It was the way she led her life."

Her life will be part of Assembly's story, Shelly said.

"There was this gentleness, this caring for each other. You could almost feel it in the air," Shelly said.

The church has been experiencing pastoral transition. Five pastors have come or gone within the year. Shelly is the only staff member from last October still in place. The year, he said, has been exhausting.

"In the midst of that exhaustion and grief and pain, there's power in community," he said.

And when it seemed like there was no way forward, Heidi led the way.

"She wanted to die as our pastor," Shelly said. "And she did. She died as an Assembly pastor."