

Pastor's book offers paths toward hope

By Andrew Perlot

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MERIDEN— In a world filled with death, disease and disappointment, the Rev. John W. Clarke said, he's been quietly noting little bits of hope, and he's written a book, "Toward a Hope-Filled Life," about where to look for them.

"It's about recognizing that sometimes, when life doesn't seem so good, people are able to find hope where there seems to be no hope," Clarke, pastor of the First Congregational Church, said. "I'll walk out of someone's hospital room or a funeral actually feeling better because the people who have been impacted the most have found hope in the pain." Clarke said that most of the ideas for the book came from his 30 years of ministering to congregations.

"It's not a book about death and dying at all," he said. "It's about day-to-day living. What can you do in that day-to-day life to feel like you've contributed? It has examples of people and events in the Bible that show us a hope-filled life."

When asked about the Old Testament story of Job, in which God actively participates in the punishment of the faithful and God-fearing Job, stripping him of his wealth and family and inflicting disease upon him, Clarke said there is hope even in such apparently unfair treatment. "At the end, Job comes to the conclusion that there is something to live for," Clarke said. "There's the possibility of tomorrow. People can learn this."

G.R. Lewis, a teacher with the Buddhist Faith Fellowship of Connecticut, which is based in Middletown, said Buddhism has similar teachings. "Death, disease, old age, accidents — life is a bumpy road," he said. "That's the first noble truth: Life is suffering." Buddhism stresses the need to be realistic about life, he said, but also holds that the universe is basically good.

Lewis quoted a poem by the founder of Shin Buddhism, Shinran Shonin, in which it is said that the light of life hits you at all times, and it's just a matter of noticing it. "The great compassion is always there," Lewis said. "We can only redirect our attention to it."

Clarke noted that the central figure of Christianity, Jesus, did not lead a charmed life. He died young, by crucifixion, and most of his teachings were originally opposed. Yet he had a vision that profoundly affected the world. "It's a practical book from a pastor's perspective to help people live their lives better, look at life more joyfully," Clarke said.

The book is published by the CSS Publishing Co., which publishes Christian-themed books. "He's a very good writer," said marketing assistant Sue Sonntag, who worked with Clarke to get the book published. "Hope is something that everyone has to have. It's full of stories and uplifting examples."

The 92-page "Toward a Hope-Filled Life" retails for \$9.95. Books are available from Clarke at the church by calling (203) 235-5704. A portion of the proceeds will go toward the creation of an orphanage in Zambia, Clarke said.