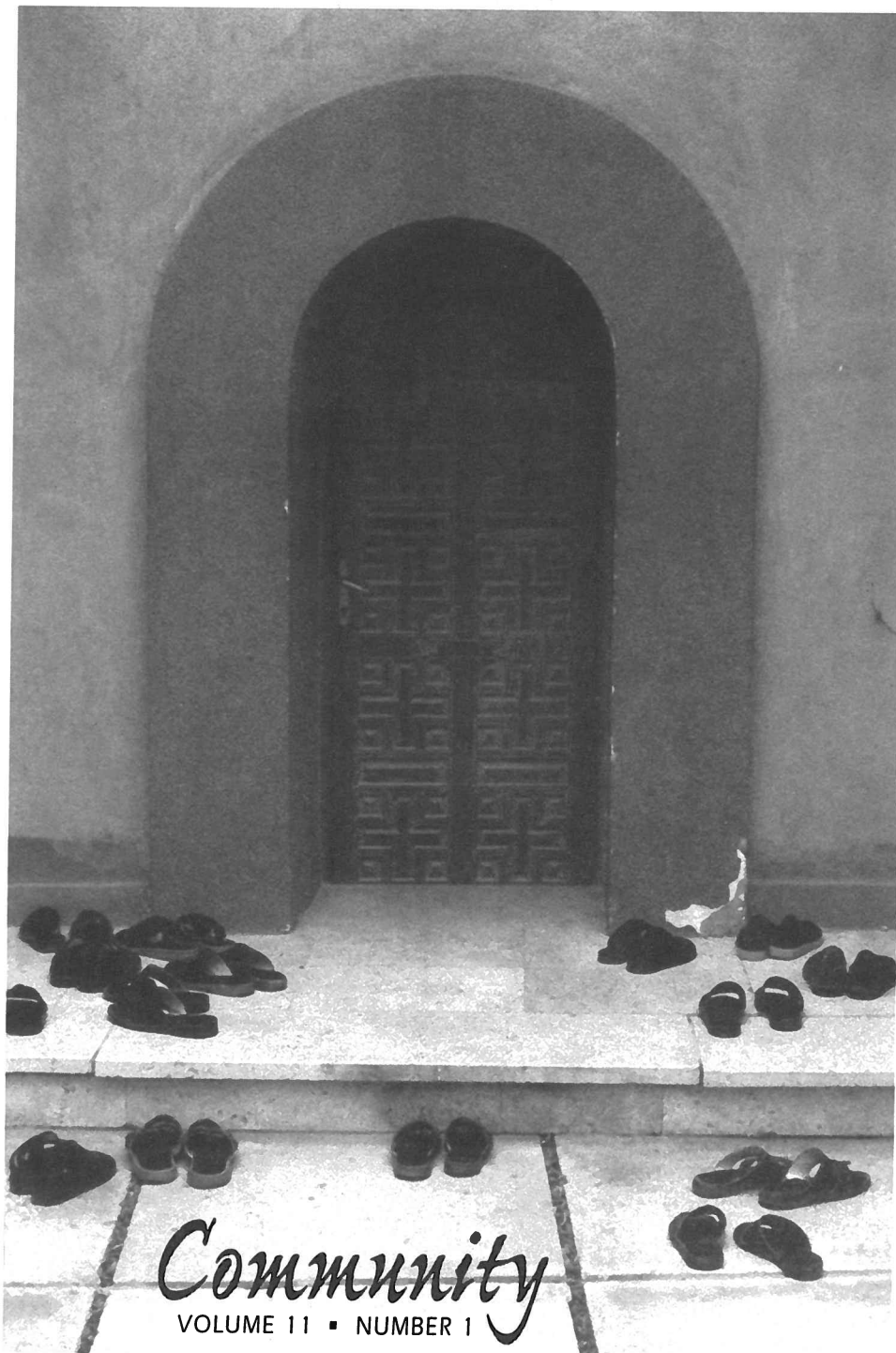


# SOPHIA

W I S D O M

*Say to Wisdom, "You are my sister."  
Proverbs 7:4a*



*Community*  
VOLUME 11 ■ NUMBER 1

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# SOPHIA

A Greek feminine noun associated with the biblical wisdom tradition, translated "wisdom" and personified in the book of Proverbs; equivalent in the New Testament to *logos*, the creative word that was with God in the beginning, creating and giving life to the world.

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### SOPHIA Mission Statement

*Sophia* offers a forum for Christian women to speak to one another about the joys and challenges of living faithfully in an uncertain, changing world. Its pages give voice to women's stories – their experiences in church and society, family and workplace, their aspirations and disappointments, their successes and failures. It invites expressions of joy and sorrow, concern and outrage. In doing so it hopes to affirm women in their quest for spiritual, emotional and physical wholeness and for the full expression of their gifts in all spheres of life.

*Sophia* was conceived and brought to birth by Mennonite Brethren women and celebrates Christian sisterhood. Its desire is to welcome differing voices. It hopes to challenge women and men of all ages as they live together in Christian community. The name SOPHIA (wisdom) expresses our desire to search and know the wisdom of God through the Scriptures and our experience as followers of Jesus Christ.

*Sophia* acknowledges the authority of God, the giver of wisdom, and of the sacred Scriptures, the story of God's dealings with women and men. "Oh the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!" (Romans 11:33).

### On the Cover:

This photo was taken by Gordon Matties. It depicts the doorway of the chapel in the monastery of St. Makarius near Cairo, Egypt. The brothers are celebrating one of several regular, daily times of prayer. They have left their shoes at the door because at prayer they are in the presence of the Lord and therefore on holy ground.



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## EDITORIAL

# What is Community?

by Lori Matties

Community is one of those words that has been invested with many meanings by the Christian church. From the earliest house groups to the desert fathers (and mothers) to monastic orders to today's local churches, Christians have been searching for ways to be together that express the love of God to each another and to the world around them. We may define community in many different ways, from "intentional community," where a group chooses to live and worship by a very specific "rule," to the "community church" that deliberately downplays its denominational distinctions in order to attract a wide range of people. Especially when traditional forms of community such as clans or tribes, extended families and even nuclear families begin to break down, the concept of church as a place of safety, long-term commitment and caring becomes important.

In my own life the search for community has been a search for home. It's not that I didn't grow up in a loving family. I did. But even my immediate family has scattered across the world to work at various tasks, and our meetings are rare. For many people I know, family has been an oppressive community, where expectations for conformity of lifestyle or belief did not allow the freedom and creativity to grow and express individual gifts. For some, the church also has been oppressive, for much the same reason. I was once part of a church that tried very hard to be intentional about its community life, but it broke down because of a failure to grasp how to accept differing expressions of faith within that close-

knit group. When human beings rub shoulders, they often get bruised.

Life in community is rarely easy. We experience discomfort when we disagree. The safe place we seek often feels unsafe if we don't feel the freedom to express our true selves or to be accepted for who we are. Jesus' command to love one another (see John 15:12-15) leads us on a path that is fraught with pitfalls and dangers, and sometimes in the thick of it we feel there is never, anywhere, truly a place to call home.

And yet, as followers of Jesus, we recognize the need to remain connected. Jesus broke bread and blessed wine with his closest friends, knowing they would betray him. Community in this life at least is never expressed perfectly, but we continue to be drawn to it. The gathering of believers, I think, is a representation of the way the Creator meant us to live. Jesus' call to his disciples to love each other is a call to community (see John 12:34-35), a call that answers the most basic of human needs. From the smallest community, that of marriage, to larger ones of many forms, we come together because we long to be understood and loved. For this reason the church continues to wrestle with what it means to become a place of safety and growth for all who wish to follow Christ.

What wise words can we speak about community? Women have long

been keepers and caretakers of community in the thousand ways they have nurtured others. What has our experience taught us? Linda Schwartz writes about how we welcome others to our churches and institutes of higher learning. Joanne Klassen and Marina Froese, dealing with different facets of singleness in the church, remind us how we compartmentalize and stereotype one another. Jake Schmidt writes about the creation of community in the seemingly unlikely setting of a prison. We are many voices, yet, as always, the voice of a

God who loves shines through and invites us to greater wisdom.

In this issue we also publish the four winning articles of our third "New Writers" Contest. We

were very pleased with the number of entries we had this time, which of course made it more difficult to choose the winners! Thank you to all who submitted your work. Your submissions provide us with a way of opening up our little community of writers to a wider range of women's voices. And congratulations to Debra Bender, Heather Patterson, Ruth Hall and Patricia Earl, whose articles you will find on pages 14 to 17.

*Community in this life at least is never expressed perfectly, but we continue to be drawn to it.*

# Community: A Safe Place For God, and a Safe Place for God's Children

by Jean Reimer

When the Three in One were ready to redeem humankind through incarnation and sacrifice, they looked for a safe place in which the Son could be born and grow up, a protective, nurturing and righteous family of active faith in which Jesus could mature into his ministry as the Messiah.

Jesus was not sent to the home of Caiaphas the high priest, nor was he sent to the care of any other in the religious community of learned rabbis, Pharisees or Saducees. No, God knew that they would consistently resist Jesus' person and message, and join together in seeking his death (see John 11:49-50).

It was Mary and Joseph, poor Galileans in Nazareth, who were chosen to be the "safe place" for the Son of God. They may have been obscure by human standards, but they were certainly not obscure by God's values, nor were they poor in terms of the ancestral criteria essential for birthing and step-fathering the Messiah: Mary, Jesus' birth mother, was of the high priestly line of Aaron, while Joseph was a direct descendant of King David (see Luke 1:5,36 and 1 Chron. 24:10).

But these priestly and royal antecedents could not have been God's only criteria for choosing Mary and Joseph to be Jesus' parents; there must have been a deeply consistent thread of trustworthy faith, obedience, integrity and love in both these humans that set them apart. God trusted Joseph to take care of this holy Son, to be the best earthly father in the world to this divine Child. God trusted Joseph to build the kind of marriage with Mary, and the kind of family home, that would be a protected and healthy sanctuary in which to raise this unique Person. God must have seen in Mary deep, strong foundations of faith and trust in her Almighty Lord, a willingness to say "Yes" to God even when the implications were overwhelming.

Over the years many called Mary "blessed" for having given birth to Jesus. Jesus, however, saw Mary's greatness rather in terms of the high spiritual dynamic of obedience

that was active in her prior to his birth. His statement, "whoever does God's will is my mother, and brother and sister," (Mark 3:35, author's paraphrase) moved backward in time to pay tribute to Mary's unhesitating obedience to God in accepting the call to bear the Christ-child. But now it spoke to a present condition of Mary's life as well, for Jesus had said "Yes" to awe-full plans. Her mother's heart

must have resisted terribly as Jesus' ministry unfolded toward death and sacrifice, yet, in this too, she was called upon to obey the will of the Father. Otherwise, she risked losing her spiritual relationship with her Son; their kinship had to be more than that of mother-child, it had to be based on the way they both obeyed the will of God, no matter how costly. Mary was a "safe

place" for Jesus only as long as he could trust her to listen to him and walk alongside him in the reality of his life and purpose.

Originally, when God formed a spiritual nation out of the Israelites, the commandments given in Leviticus 19 and 20 prescribed a community that was unique in world history: there was to be no human sacrifice, incest, adultery, brothels, violence or abuse, revenge, murder, inter-clan warfare, slavery, fraud or neglect of aged parents. God built a safe place for the poor, the aged and the handicapped, for women, employees and foreigners. Laws assured care for the environment, weekly rest and worship, fair court judgements, just dealings in land and property. The law underlying all of these, God said, was *love* – "love your neighbour as yourself" (Lev.19:18).

Yet this very community created by God was often not a safe place even for the Creator; think of the abuse the nation of Israel hurled at God over the centuries with their disobedience, their killing of the prophets. The religious community of Jesus' day was no better; it placed legalism above God and humankind. Jesus, in his life and teachings with his disciples, envisioned a spiritual community that paralleled what God valued in Mary and Joseph and that built on the laws of Leviticus – a community that would be God's own "safe abode" and also a safe sanctuary

*It was Mary and Joseph, poor Galileans in Nazareth, who were chosen to be the "safe place" for the Son of God.*

for God's spiritual children, where they could grow into obedient, love-filled ministers of grace.

The apostles strove to build just such a church: communities in which both physical and spiritual needs were addressed, a 'safe family' in which people were embraced, taught the truth, looked at with grace through the Spirit's eyes, corrected, forgiven, encouraged, honed and sharpened into a spiritual body dedicated to obedience to God and to loving one another.

Larry Crabb, in his book, *The Safest Place on Earth\**, visualizes what the church should be – a truly spiritual community that is formed only as we turn our souls to each other and truly listen, and as we are ready to be changed by the Word and the Spirit; a place that is safe for all people, in whatever state they find themselves. In the middle of all our battles and struggles, we yearn for intimacy – the kind of joyful, intimate community the Trinity enjoys (Crabb, p 124).

.....  
*Jean Reimer, a member of Sophia's editorial collective, works with Wycliffe Bible Translators. She lives in Steinbach, MB, and is member of Cornerstone Bible Church in Steinbach and Church of the Way in Winnipeg.*

*\*Crabb, Larry, The Safest Place on Earth. Nashville: Word, 1999.*

## Mother God

by Cheryl Denise

Mother God come  
rock me to sleep  
read me the story  
of your giving birth.  
Feed me oatmeal cookies  
baked by wrinkled hands.  
Soothe me with  
honey-laced milk.  
Fold me over  
in a ragged  
thick quilt.  
Hold my head  
to your breast.  
Show me the pictures  
till my eyes tire  
and into dreams  
dance the Seven Sisters.  
Kiss me then  
without my knowing.  
Come Mother God  
put me to bed.

.....  
*Cheryl Denise grew up in Elmira, Ontario. She and her husband, Mike Miller, currently are part of Shepherds Field Community in Philippi, WV. She works as a nurse and has had poems published in Greeting the Dawn: An Anthology of New Mennonite Writing and Wild Sweet Notes: Fifty Years of West Virginia Poetry 1950-1999.*

## God is Love

by Helga Doermer

Last winter, in preparation for a class presentation, I allowed Annie Herring's musical rendition of 1 Corinthians 13 to wash over me again and again. My task was to imagine how this familiar passage could be interpreted through the movements of liturgical dance. As the words and music enveloped me, a few lines seemed to beckon.

*...Without love in my heart, I have done nothing...Without love in my heart, I am but nothing...there's no life without love...[If I] have not love in my heart, I have said nothing...I need...[Your love, perfect love] in my heart....*

As I breathed in the notes and words and rhythm, I was partially freed from the culturally conditioned inhibitions that tend to keep me from self-expression through body movement. For a while, I stood still, wrapped 'round by the message. Then heart and hands heard what my mind could not yet comprehend. As Annie repeated the words "Without love in my heart" I raised my hands, palms up, heavenward. Then, hand nesting in hand, my palm came to rest upon my heart. I stopped – surprised at what I had just done. This was my unconscious and symbolic expression of "love." As I reflected on the meaning of the gesture, realization gradually dawned. My understanding of love was not as something generated by the human heart. It was an understanding that the source of our love has its beginning in the living God.

"God is love." A shiver of excitement ran through me with the thought. "God is love." I wondered if this was just my imagining, or if God was explicitly described as love in scriptures. I opened my computer, slipped in the Bible disc, typed the words "God is love," pressed the button, held my breath, and there it was: "Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love" (1 John 4:8 NRSV) and yet again: "So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them" (1 John 4:16 ).



SADAO WATANABE

I returned to my study of 1 Corinthians 13 and reread Paul's portrayal of love. Prior to that moment, I had thought he was describing an ideal that humanity would never realize – a utopian vision that could do little more than mirror the shortcomings and imperfections in our mortal relationships. Now the words began to resonate with a greater depth of meaning. I read them as first defining the essence of God. (Without *God*, I am nothing. Without *God* in my heart, I am nothing. There is no life without *God*.) Then they represent what we are called to live.

A mentor and friend once painted a picture with a graceful gesture of her hands. She held her palms upward. One hand was raised heavenward, and the other stretched out before her, symbolizing a connection and commitment simultaneously to God and to all humanity – open hands prepared both to give and to receive. As I write, the image

transforms. I imagine all humanity gathered together in a co-operative dance. The stage on which they dance is created by the palms of eternal and unconditional Love. Love fuels the dance by emanating a generous stabilizing energy of patience, peace, kindness, strength, hope, joy, truthfulness, trust and an enduring, steadfast devotion.

Reading 1 Corinthians 13 through the lens of this image gives expression to a practical theology. To be born of God is to be born of Love. It is to experience the daily welling of

*The source of our love  
has its beginning in the  
living God*

God's perfect expression of h/er being in our lives – a love described by Paul. God is Love and models this perfect love to us in relationship with h/er. S/he extends it to us that we may freely extend it to others. We are called to allow the love of God, which freely flows through our lives, to find articulation in our relationships through word and act. Love, freely given and received between God and humanity, is the foundational and grounding element of our faith community. The faith community finds its fullest expression as the body of God in communicating the God-love it has received. Through our incarnation of the body, the love of God is given a face and a tangible reality. The essence of God is made visible and can reach out to heal a broken and divisive humanity.

.....  
*Helga Doermer, a member of Sophia's editorial collective, is completing a Master of Divinity degree this year. She and her husband have two sons, and they live in Winnipeg.*

# JESUS' FIFTH WORD ON THE CROSS, "I thirst" (JOHN 19:38)

by Hanny Labun

## DRINK FREELY

parched dry  
he hangs there  
Jesus  
unslated thirst  
this son of man

this God  
who called

Loud

come, still your  
craving  
for liquid substance  
streams I have  
streams you'll get  
life-giving  
water in abundance

Plentiful

an unstopped well  
artesian  
gurgling on

Forever.

drink and quench  
the stream runs  
within

Satisfying  
thirst.

He calls

parched  
without the Presence  
God forsaken  
alone  
Jesus  
He calls

Loud

longing for fluid  
lunging forward  
to craving places  
sucking up the dryness  
arid withering cells  
shrivelled heart  
dehydrated spirit  
to be touched  
by vinegar

Water

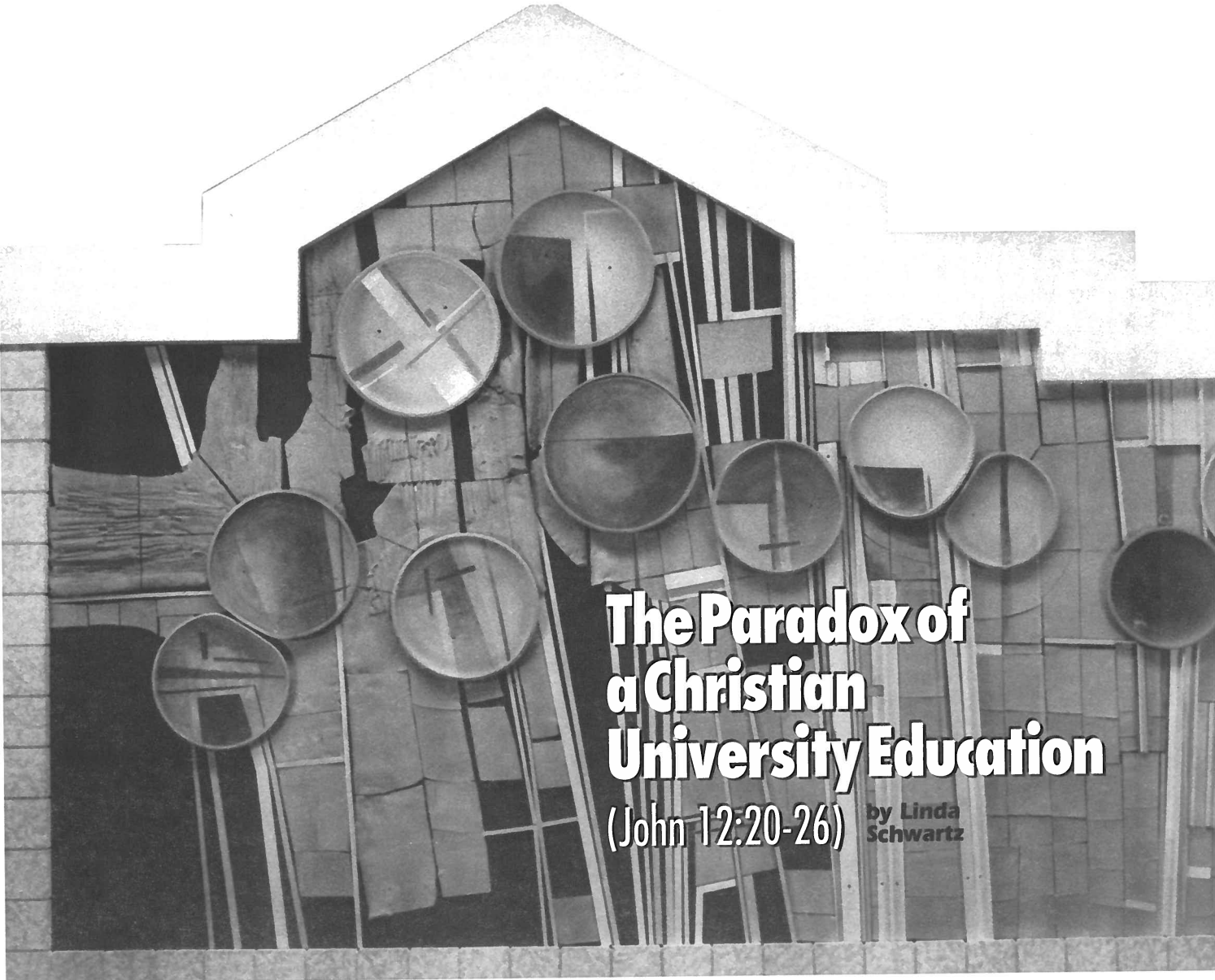
Living  
Flowing free to drink  
To feel  
Satisfied

Fulfilled.

eternal Presence  
Holy Spirit  
quench yearning desire

He calls.

.....  
*Hanny Labun, a member of Sophia's collective, has long been involved with women's lives in ministries of various kinds. She attends Rothesay Community Church in Winnipeg. She and her husband have two grown children.*



# The Paradox of a Christian University Education


(John 12:20-26)

by Linda  
Schwartz

*The following is excerpted from the baccalaureate address given at Concord College on 16 April 2000. It was spoken to the last graduating class of that college before it federated with two other colleges to become part of the new Canadian Mennonite University. Though the address speaks to a particular community at a particular time, it also adds an important perspective to the question of how Christian communities relate to the world around them.*

**N**ow among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks" (John 12:20 NRSV). Sources tell us that these folks were converts to the Jewish faith, and had made pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. They had heard about Jesus and had likely witnessed the triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

They must have gathered their courage, going to Philip – the disciple with the Greek name, the one who seemed most likely to hear them – and asking him for an audience with the Great Teacher. "What's he like? He doesn't seem like other Jews.... Do you think we might have a moment of his time?" Philip, diplomatic, sensitive to the surroundings and not wanting to create a scene, did what any good layperson would do: he convened a meeting with an elder. Andrew, a disciple who had been with Jesus from the beginning, was consulted, and the two made their way to Jesus. I'm sure they must have wondered how he would react to their strange request to allow foreigners an audi-



ence. They had not experienced much of him outside of their own cultural context. Tax collectors, prostitutes, Pharisees, untouchables – he had certainly consorted with all strata of Jewish society – including most undesirable types (hadn't he even told a story once about a Samaritan? – ah, but that was just a story) ... Oh, yeah, there was that Samaritan woman by Jacob's well! And there was the Centurion (oh, but the Master had to be persuaded to go heal his servant), ...remember that nuisance of a Canaanite woman in the north (the Master tried to tell her that he had come first for the House of Israel), but then what was that story about "rendering to Caesar"? His responses were always a surprise and a mystery to them. The learning curve had always been steep. But this – this was a new wrinkle. What would he say?

I find it curious that John's Gospel records Jesus' words at this juncture: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified..." (John 12:23). Did Jesus know

something about this encounter? Had he been waiting for it? Did he sense that for some reason, he must not face the inevitable cross until he had made a bridge with the "unchosen" people? "For God so loved the world..." the whole world, "...so that everyone who believes...may have eternal life" (John 3:16).

I think we often equate our experience in the church with being a Jew in Jerusalem. There is a comfort zone, a place of retreat to familiarity, patterns of behaviour, into which we fall that make us complacent, uncomprehending, deaf to the words of Jesus: "The hour has come...." We don't spend enough time in consultation with our brothers and sisters in Christ over how Jesus may continue to be "glorified" in our present age, in our society, in our Jerusalem.

The church has adopted two distinct modes of being in the world. Both owe their origins to the early church; both embody legitimate but different ways of living out the life and example of Jesus in community. These modes are

*The church has adopted two distinct modes of being in the world. Both owe their origins to the early church.*

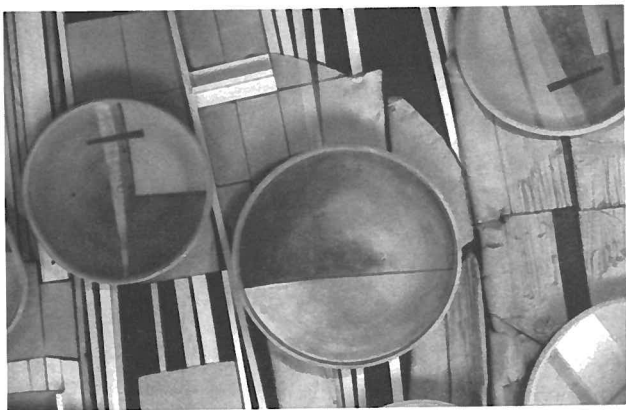
not denominationally distinctive; rather, both types of communities are found across the spectrum of worshipping groups of various faith confessions. Furthermore, tensions between these two modes exist within many congregations who struggle with where to

align themselves with respect to purpose and practice.

The believer's fellowship – the gathered church – operates out of a real or perceived need for protection from the world. There are four closed walls, and one gains access through rigorous community scrutiny and initiation rites such as baptism on confession of faith. There are strict rules or codes of conduct for how to "be church" together, and there is an explicit understanding of the core values that mark the identity of such an intentional community. When the Greeks come to see Jesus in this setting, there is a high degree of anxiety or fear of contamination. This way is dependent on outward visible signs that demonstrate an inward spiritual work in the life of a believer; there is a sense that the essence of faith is manifest in action and the spoken word.

A second way of being in community makes no claim on an individual other than confession of Jesus as Lord. This organism is dynamic, an open community that continually tests itself and lives in tension between individual convictions and core values. Within this three-walled structure – open to the world – there is constant movement of people between the outer court and the inner sanctuary – moving from the invitation of the open door (friendship) to learning and familiarity with community and the way of Christ (discipleship) to a place of discovery of gifts and the freedom to serve (leadership) to acknowledgement of what gives meaning to our life together (worship).

This is a "grace-full" community in which everyone takes ownership of the whole. It taps into a power source that is the mystical reality of Christ present in the world – a generous Christian orthodoxy – a power source fraught with dangers and tensions because it is boundless (bigger than anything else that can be experienced), but a source that knows no fear because Christ is in all and over all. The result is an open, creative chaos; a structure that, by



its very nature, cannot be subverted. Here individuals are accountable to Jesus alone, but their experience is tested and corrected in light of community values. Here, Christ's embrace leaves nothing out. Greeks (and Christians) are welcomed into a fellowship in which it is never fully possible to articulate a confession of its theological position – save only in the grace and mercy afforded by God in Jesus Christ, freely given to all humankind regardless of circumstance. This way requires a high degree of personal discipleship – there is no outward measure or mark to attain; the grace and mercy of Jesus is your only invitation to be in community.

There are ways in which the ethos of Christian community may be translated to institutions of Christian higher education. Some Christian colleges and universities are modelled after the more intentional community – they can be somewhat exclusionary about who is accepted for study, their guiding principles exert a deliberate code of conduct on all those who come to learn, and all study is engaged out of explicit doctrinal perspectives, which are the outward visible signs of the theological principles and core values that guide the institution. They are anxious and fearful about the Greeks who might come asking to see Jesus – and with good reason. There might be dangerous questions raised for those within the ranks that would forever alter the centred identity of the community.

Other schools, known as liberal arts institutions, have long since left their Bible college or churchly roots. They have grown away from a fear of secular culture; in many cases, the faith-centred approach to study has been hijacked by the lobby of academic freedom and value neutrality. Greeks are welcome here; but if they've come to find Jesus, their task will be somewhat of a challenge. The sub-culture of the institution encourages comparten-

talization; faith and learning may coexist but are not connected. Jesus may appear in dormitory conversation or in community worship, but there will not be any sign of him within the academic program.

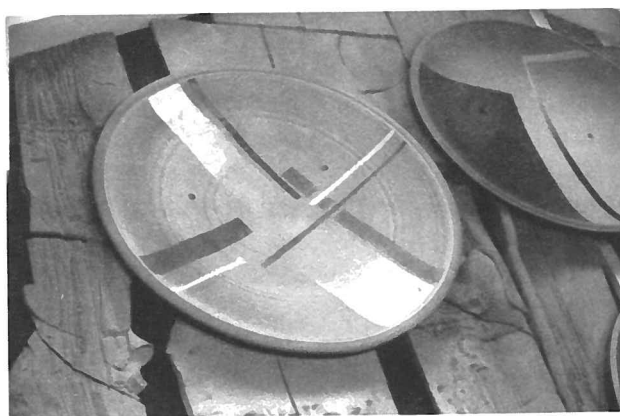
Where then, can the Greeks go to learn about Jesus?

There is a third way – another type of school, one that tries to engage the world of faith and the world of learning and integrate the two. Most would call this a crazy experiment and write it off. By its very nature, this is a scary type of place, fraught with all kinds of fears and tensions, because here there is an invitation to aliens of all sorts – an invitation of grace, and a welcome from the Lord Jesus to come and discover who they are in relation to a God who loves them unconditionally. Here, there is no condemnation – only loving acceptance. Here, there are no questions that cannot be asked, because there is no fear – Jesus Christ is Lord over all. This sort of institution is governed, both in the classroom and in the worship and social life of the community, by an earnest desire to know the world and to know the ways in which Christ works in the

world. Teachers are mentors who share the journey of discovery with students – a journey that is ever in process; and students tussle with real issues in the world and the dominant culture, which cut across issues of faith and Christian perspective at every turn.

Concord College has attempted to live in that kind of tension. The model has never been well understood either by the particular Christian community that has supported it or by the secular world with which it continues to engage on many levels. Part of the problem is that there still exists no real educational paradigm by which living and studying in this sort of tension might be possible. Sometimes we've not done this sort of education very well, but then, we are not ultimately responsible for the outcomes, are we? And, after all it was only an experiment. Or was it?

*This is a "grace-full" community in which everyone takes ownership of the whole.*



We do not know for a certainty that the Greeks met Jesus, or what he might have said to them. But the words of Jesus in John's Gospel – wrapped in mystery – echo through the ancient walls of the church and down the corridors of higher learning: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies...." Unless we are willing to give up the comfort zone – unless some risk is taken to invite the Greeks to the festival together with us, I'm afraid we might be missing the boat. The fruit of our labour will be in vain, and something precious that we value will be lost entirely if we keep it to ourselves. Indeed, something quite rich might be in store for us, and we will never fully realize it unless we are willing to receive. Every once in awhile, Greeks come, like sages from the east, bearing gifts....

There need be no fear. We are all loved by God and are all seekers on a lifelong, multi-cultural, multi-perspectived journey. Our only hope, our only glory, is in the cross of Jesus Christ. He is our life; he is our peace. He is what has made it possible for this diverse community of Concord College to continue to grow in grace and in celebration of our common life – our common union.

Many of this year's graduands have come to College as Greeks to Jerusalem. You were believers, but you did not belong to the dominant Mennonite sub-culture; or, even if you claim membership ethnically, you came "from away." You wanted to learn about Jesus; you wanted to meet him. My sense is that your mission has been successful. And, as a result, your lives have been transformed and your world has been enlarged and enriched by this encounter. You have been mentored by Philips and Andrews; they have had many private consultations about you, and have gone to Jesus to intercede on your behalf.

Some of the faculty and staff have also come to this place as Greeks to Jerusalem. Although our manner and habits – and even some of our most dearly held theological tenets and practices – might have appeared strange within this sub-culture, we too have learned about Jesus in this place, and we have met him in profound ways.

Christian university education is not about control or indoctrination. Paradoxically, it is about being willing to lose one's faith in order to find it – giving up one's freedom in order to gain it – it is about chaos, about living in tension, about engaging a sinful and disordered world and about learning to access the power available to us through Jesus' redeeming act of atonement. We are at the same time continually transformed by the renewing of our minds while becoming agents of transformation by the power of the Holy Spirit working in and through our lives.

Jesus' words remain as constant today as they were at that pivotal moment in salvation history: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.... Whoever serves me, the Father will honour" (John 12:23,26).

"Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls

into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who [would protect] their life lose it, and those who [give away] their life in this world will keep it for eternal life"(John 12:23,26).

.....  
Linda Schwartz was a professor of music at Concord College for twenty years, resigning at the end of the 2000 school year. She is now completing a doctorate degree at the University of Manitoba and is beginning a position as professor of music and dean of Professional Studies and Performing Arts at Trinity Western University, Langley, B.C. Linda and her husband, Tim, have one daughter, and they are members at St. Margaret's Anglican Church in Winnipeg. Linda credits David Widdicombe, rector at St. Margaret's, with the idea and practice of the open church model.

A version of this address has also appeared in the March 6, 2001, edition of *ChristianWeek*.

### Opening the Dialogue:

How have you experienced community as Linda describes it in your church or school? How have you experienced the tensions between the "two modes" she describes?

Send your thoughts and ideas by e-mail or to our address: *Sophia*, P.O. Box 28062, RPO North Kildonan, Winnipeg, MB R2G 4E9.

"Twelve" is the title of the sculpted mural shown with this article. It was created by Alvin Pauls for the 50th anniversary of Bethel Mennonite Church in Winnipeg. The piece is designed on the theme of "discipleship" and, based on the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19, depicts twelve clay platters representing the twelve apostles on a background of wood and tile. The clay symbolizes humankind and the earth, and the wood symbolizes "hope, growth and redemption (in the form of crosses). The visual stress and distortions of the wood symbolize the limited interpretation we place upon the message of "The Cross." Alvin Pauls is a graduate of the University of Manitoba in Fine Arts and Education and has received several awards for his work. He has fulfilled many commissions across North America for his artwork.

# Sex and the Single Woman

by Joanne Klassen

I am a single, 34-year-old woman. I love people. I work hard. I contribute to church life. I would love to be married some day, but who can see the future? Just as much as my married friends and family, I am a sexual being.

Based on how the church comes across about single people and sex, you would think that last statement was false. Here are at least four different assumptions the church makes about people who are single. First, singles are asexual and only become sexual when presented with an opportunity to marry. Second, singles should not be sexual at all. Third, singles are "burning" and if we talk about sex with them it would be too uncomfortable for all parties. Fourth, singles' longings for sexual expression and sensuality are to be suppressed.

All people start life as singles and remain so for at least 16 to 30 years. Many who marry have periods of singleness again later in life.

We are taught about sex at school or at home. I feel fortunate that I have caring, open-minded, openly sexual parents. As a child, I witnessed many moments of sensual affection between them and guessed that sex was a good part of their marriage. I was taught by my parents' example that sex is good, at least within marriage.

The church warns us not to express our sexual selves because desire is dangerous and should be reserved for marriage, where it is *finally* a good thing to be sexual.

Most of us have xx or xy chromosomes that define our gender as female or male, and most of us are heterosexual, but *all* of us are sexual.



We are made in God's image, every one of us. If God is like us, but also more than us, then our sexual selves are also in the image of God. By exploring and becoming fully sexual we learn to know a creator God with a wild and crazy imagination – a playful God who found this weird way of powerfully connecting our minds (capable of erotic thought and invention), our emotions (what a feeling!) and our bodies (instruments of arousal). We worship a relational God who wants to *know* us inside out. God is a passionate God who fuses with an

other in ecstatic joy and serene calm. We have a monotheistic, monolithic (!) God who has created our bodies with an intense capacity for pleasure.

Sexual expression is the most natural thing in the world.

Which infant, when being changed or bathed, doesn't automatically move her/his hand to her/his genitals? Which toddler doesn't come up with some amazing behaviours and phrases about the feelings of arousal in her/his body? Studies on the development of our adult sexual selves show that we learn, as infants, what kind of touching, playing and pleasuring we like. These things form the bedrock of our adult sexual expression.

In the Mennonite world of which I am part, I believe people are generally fearful of the body. The main traditional expressions of the body that have been permitted are singing and physical labour. What a wonder it would be to be encouraged to learn the potential we have for physical pleasure and sensation – texture, touch, movement and exhilaration! What would it be like to have our sexual selves affirmed rather than quieted, ignored or chastised? People who are single are expected to return to (or stay at) a pre-pubescent level of sexual expression – where sexual feelings and self-pleasuring are prohibited, or at the very least, unacknowledged. What would it be like if single women were not pitied, blamed for their "lack" of a spouse, thought of as dangerous to men and married women or ignored? What would it be like to consider single women respectfully as people with normal sexual feelings and

expressions? If churches began to see people who are single as equal, the barrier between married and single people would diminish. Single people would no longer be second-class at church.

Lots of people, married and single, have sexual issues, whether because of sexual abuse, childhood experiences, psychological factors acted out sexually, societal values and religious expectations. Every sexual experience is not celebratory or desirable or right.

As Christians we must be guided by values in the way we choose and participate in sexual experiences. One of those values is the preciousness and godliness of our sexual selves. All of us are "fearfully and wonderfully made" (see Psalm 139). Let us celebrate creation and creativity. Let us bless single people also to be sexual people.

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*Joanne Klassen is a psychotherapist in the Central Region Health Authority of Manitoba and in private practice in Winnipeg. She has a Masters degree in Marriage, Family, Child Counselling and in Theology. She is a member of River East MB Church.*

### Opening the Dialogue

In this article, and in Marina Froese's article (p 20), the authors describe the church as a community that has not valued single people as it should, either in their ability use their gifts fully or in its understanding of their sexuality. How do we begin to break the barriers that divide us? How do we begin to talk in positive and healthy ways about our sexuality, married or single? Send your thoughts and ideas by e-mail or to our address: *Sophia*, P.O. Box 28062, RPO North Kildonan, Winnipeg, MB R2G 4E9.

## LETTERS

Thank you for the December issue of *Sophia*. It was both liberating and inspiring. As fears are named and acknowledged first by the writers of the articles and then by the readers, there is the possibility to be freed from these fears, then inspired by new hope to go on. The sculptures of Helen E. Norman throughout greatly enhanced the magazine, but I was riveted by the face of the woman who was receiving baptism and I went back to it time and again. Her hands clasped in prayer and the mixture of joy and grief on her face says it all. Sara Balzer's story, Erica Block's sermon and the "Unspeakable Issues" Column stand out for me. Thanks again for a great magazine which I enjoyed during the rare quiet moments of the holiday season.

*Elfrieda Schroeder, Kitchener, ON*

I just finished reading "The Rape of Tamar" (10:4, Winter 2000). My experience has always been that whenever the subject of sexual assault or abuse comes up, women slowly emerge to tell their stories. I have always felt surrounded by women with shared experiences. I actually felt quite common, comforted by the knowing looks that were passed around. The only uncomfortable, unsafe experiences with telling my story have been in my own first family and in the church.

About three years ago, during a worship committee meeting at my church, we were discussing an upcoming sermon that was going to "touch" on abuse issues. Two women at the meeting recalled an event in our church some years back. A woman from a social service agency had come to talk to

the girls in our girls' club. These two committee women couldn't recall what the social worker had talked about, but this visitor had commented later to some girls' club leaders that she could tell by the happy, healthy faces she saw in the room that none of those girls had been sexually assaulted or abused. The conversation at our meeting moved slowly towards an understanding that "this" probably wasn't happening in our church. We would admit that it was possible but, really, we thought it was unlikely. I was baffled. I couldn't even speak, I was so upset. That conversation was so completely foreign to me, I found it impossible to respond. I later imagined that I had been brave enough to say, "So, you don't know anyone in this church who has been sexually assaulted?... Well, let me introduce myself..." But instead, I had remained silent.

Now, three years later, your article illuminated for me an inaccurate assumption that had been growing inside. I was not conscious of the fact that I had begun to believe I was indeed the only person in a church of 350 who could share a story of sexual assault. I suppose this is what happens in a place where you hear, "Good thing we don't have to worry about any of that abuse and assault stuff here." This is a place where you are guaranteed to keep on not having to worry about it because you will not hear about it.

Thank you for reminding me that I am not alone. Even though the voices are silent, I have a renewed vision that I am surrounded by shared experiences.

*Joanie, Winnipeg*

# Jesse's Joy

by Heather Patterson

The intense, equatorial sun beat down on the lush banana plants towering over a small bundle that lay, almost hidden, in the bush. A baby howled with all the frustration and rage his tiny, malnourished body could produce. No one heard his cries. He, like so many other Ugandan children, had been abandoned, discarded like someone's unwanted rubbish.

Yet there was One who heard his cries and One who passionately loved the unloved.

When the little boy was brought to Good Shepherd's Fold, a Christian orphanage, he was seriously underweight and malnourished, with infected wounds. At the age of one year, he looked half his age.

His name is Jesse.

I met him a year later. Coming to Uganda from Canada, I expected that I would encounter many cultural differences and challenges during my year stay, but I never imagined how these beautiful, vivacious Ugandan children would forever capture my heart.

I first saw Jesse in the dark, hot garage that was the crowded bedroom of the two- to five-year-old boys. Those rowdy boys never stood still long enough for me to count them, but there were almost twenty of these pre-schoolers. This wild group, so desperate for love and attention, would travel in a pack and swarm me with hugs when I stood still or sat down. I called them "the cling-ons."

However, Jesse was not a member of the infamous cling-ons. At two years old, he could not talk or walk. He was afraid of everything and he was generally screaming or crying. His clothes were dirty and soiled, diapers being a rare commodity. His nose was a steady stream, as he constantly battled sickness. The AIDS virus that is ravaging Uganda, orphaning horrendous numbers of children, does not always leave the little ones untouched. Jesse is HIV positive.

I never saw him smile. He was the most miserable child in the orphanage. No one had ever loved him.

God told me to love this child. As a special education teacher, my heart has always been for the disadvantaged, difficult children: the ones who are hard to love. But Jesse was a challenge. Only through the grace of God was I able to be the love of Jesus for Jesse.

I began to spend time with him, carrying him around the orphanage with me. He slowly became more comfortable with me; that is, his eyes no longer held their typical look of terror. He screamed and convulsed into a stormy temper tantrum if I tried to get him to stand. However, he liked to be held and hugged. So I would sit on the ground

covered with Uganda's fine-red dirt, and hug Jesse. With his arms tightly around my neck, he never seemed to notice that he was standing. Gradually, his leg muscles became stronger and his confidence began to rise.

I have never worked harder to make a child smile. I tried swings and bounces, both of which had the opposite effect of terrifying him. Next, I went through my repertoire of songs, toys, and tickles. The first time I saw him smile, I nearly cried at its beauty. Jesse's smile had the bright, sudden beauty of a sunbeam breaking through dark clouds.

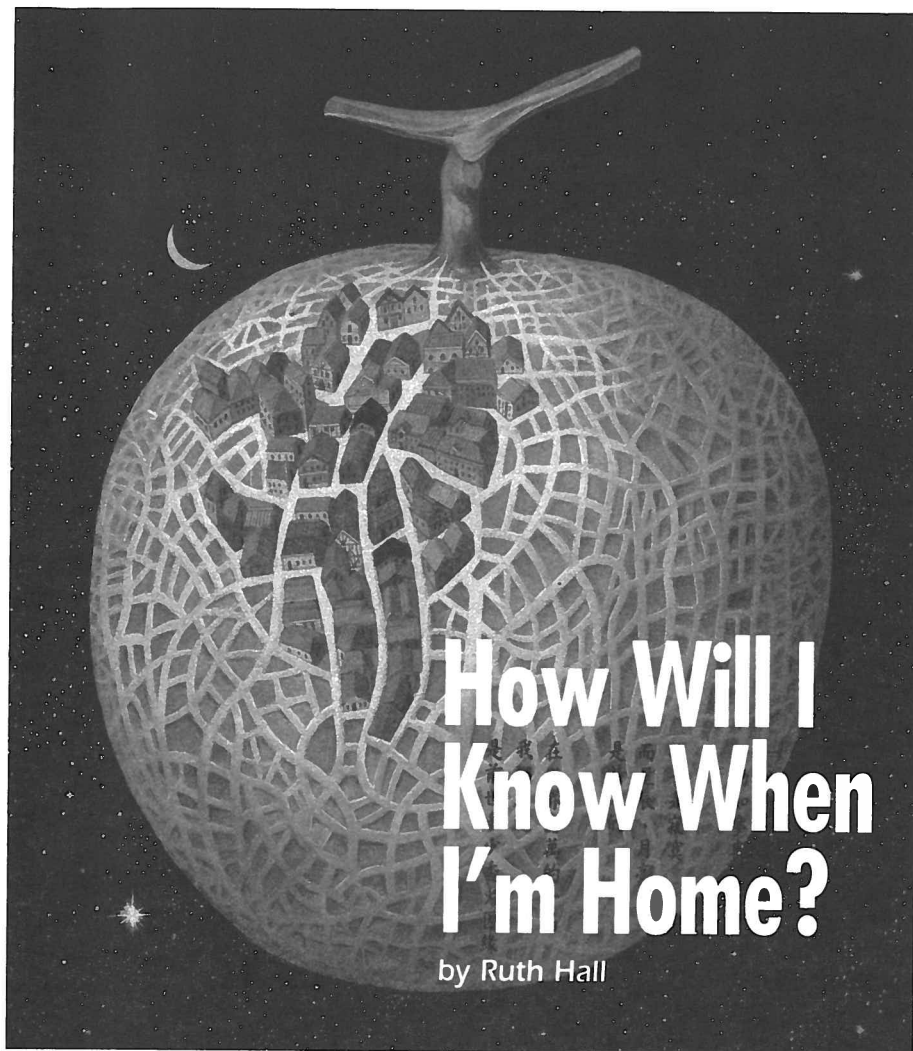
It was amazing to see God's love transform this little life. It was a metamorphosis as mysterious and wondrous as a butterfly's tentative tearing out of its chrysalis.

As Jesse began to walk, I soon had a constant shadow. Everywhere I went I had a little boy following me, clutching my hand or my skin, angrily crying if I went too fast for him or if he could not accompany me. I had my own personal "cling-on." He knew that I loved him and so he loved me.

My Jesse taught me about the power of God's love. Not only was the transformation incredible, but I marveled at the way Jesse tenaciously clung to me. I too, have been rescued by love out of my miserable and desperate situation. But unlike Jesse, I was not so faithful in clinging to the One whose love has rescued me. Am I clinging to other things or people? Do I actively seek out God, never wanting to lose sight of the One who loves me? I need to cling so close that no matter where God leads, I follow without hesitation. I want to be a "cling-on" like my little Jesse. *Because you are my help, I will sing in the shadow of your wings. My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.* (Psalm 64:7-8)

I pray that Jesse will know at an early age the One who will never leave him. Jesus is able to give him joy, peace and love, even as Jesse continues to live and battle with the effects of HIV on his body. Today, this little boy who has captured my heart walks and runs; he smiles, he laughs; he talks, and he sings "Jesus Loves Me."

.....  
Heather Patterson lives in Edmonton, Alberta. Her interests include acting and directing with the drama ministry at Castle-downs Baptist Church and creative writing, and this year she has begun to play on a women's ice hockey team.



# How Will I Know When I'm Home?

by Ruth Hall

*By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country ... For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. Hebrews 11:9-10*

**I**t had been a long day and a tedious process. I was sitting on a bus, waiting to cross the border from Estonia into Latvia and I had run out of reading material. My passport was out ready to be stamped, so in my boredom I began to page through it. Have you read your passport lately? If you're like me, you may be more important than you realize. Inside the front cover of my passport it reads,

*The secretary of State for External Affairs of Canada requests, in the name of Her Majesty the Queen, all those whom it may concern to allow the bearer to pass freely without let or hindrance and to afford the bearer such assistance and protection as may be necessary.*

I thought to myself that if those Estonian and Latvian border guards knew who they had waiting in line and my obvious connection with royalty, they would quickly speed up this whole process. Unfortunately, when our turn came up, the border officials weren't dazzled in the least by this pretty piece of prose in my passport. The fact that they may not have been able to read English probably added to their indifference.

I did get across the border eventually, but the thought occurred to me

that sometimes I treat my citizenship in God's kingdom in the same way. I've been a member for years, but at times I'm still oblivious of my rights and privileges. In foreign countries that don't share my country's democratic ideas and where English isn't spoken, the promises in my passport probably are not worth the paper they are printed on. But how much worse is it, when I live and act as if I am ignorant of my heavenly King's great and precious promises. Those are the promises that really matter, especially as I prepare to return "home" in a few weeks.

By the time we get back to our permanent and fixed address, it will be 19 months after we left to serve on a short-term mission. At least seven of those months will have been spent living out of suitcases and staying in tents, hotels, or with other people. We will eventually return to our house that took us four years to build while we meticulously designed and laboured over every detail even up to the day we left for Estonia. Somehow over the months, that house has lost some of its importance to us, and all of a sudden, I understand what C.S. Lewis meant when he said, "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."

*Oh God, how this travel-worn body looks forward to the day when I can say, "I'm home!" I won't have to unpack a thing. You will be there and that will be enough.*

.....  
Ruth Hall is a stay-at-home mom of a two-year-old daughter, Kaira. She and her husband, Brian, live in Biggar, Saskatchewan, where Brian is pastor of the Associated Gospel Church.

# Resurrection

by Debra H. Bender

Webster defines "resurrection" as the rising of Christ from the dead, so my husband's literal return from the almost-dead seemed like a good story to share with the congregation one Easter morning. Cliff was the recipient of a double lung transplant seven years ago; getting to the transplant was the single most unnerving experience of our lives. Cliff came within days of death, and our last clinic visit just two days before his surgery left the nursing staff in tears, fearful that they would never see him again, frustrated at being unable to help. We understand now that the only explanation for why all the details of January 27, 1994, came together is that it was the working out of God's purpose. During an eleven-hour surgery, Cliff was literally resurrected by a miracle of modern medicine.

However, the word "resurrect" is also defined as bringing something back to use or restoring, and a couple of other ideas presented themselves: resurrection as a return of light after a particularly dark time, the return of spring after a Chicago winter, the return of life after a close brush with death – or perhaps a fresh, new understanding of an old, familiar idea. For me, staring death in the face has resurrected, if you will, the preciousness of life. Resurrection has become a way to live.

Though the details have started to fade, I will never forget the long, frightening months spent waiting for a donor; the morning crying sessions in the shower wondering why Cliff had to suffer and how I was ever going to handle everything I had to do that day. Now, in the morning, as I walk the dog and watch the sun burst over the eastern sky line, I often sing, alone in the park, just the dog and I, a song that was a favourite of my Grandpa Kremer: "I owe the Lord a morning song of gratitude and praise for the kind mercies he has shown in lengthening out my days." How many times I heard and sang those words without understanding. Resurrection: facing death makes life so precious. Appreciate it, cherish it, be grateful for it.

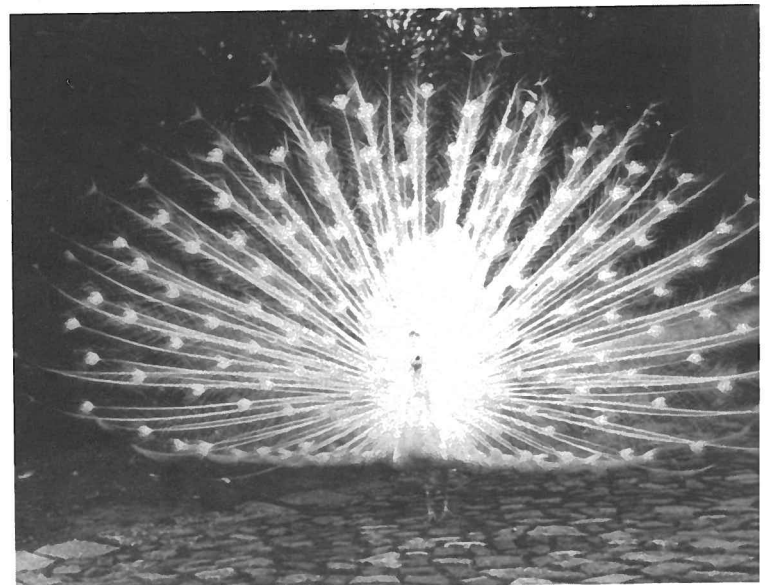
Cliff and I share natural (perhaps cultivated) tendencies toward perfection, wanting everything to go smoothly and just right. That's not reality; life has its ongoing stresses and aggravations. We have been forced to realize, time and again, that the only important thing is that Cliff is alive and well – everything else is a "flitting blip on the computer screen" of our life. Resurrection: facing death makes life so precious. Don't squander it on insignificant aggravations.

I've been called "Nervous Nellie" – and with good reason. It's easy for me to become frantic with worry about what the future holds – I know what the statistics are, I know how quickly everything could go wrong, I know that Cliff's treatment is just a shade beyond experimental, I know how few transplant friends have survived. What ifs and hows and whys can send me into a tailspin. How easy to forget who holds the future; how hard to let go of worry and fear. Resurrection: facing death makes life so precious. Don't sully it with useless fretting.

Five years ago we lost our best transplant friend. On the first anniversary of his death, a gray Sunday morning, I cried as I remembered Terry and the song that Melvin sang to him during the service before the respirator was turned off, "Breathe on me breath of God." I thought about asking my congregation to sing that song during worship, for me and for Terry, but I didn't have to ask – it was one of the songs Pastor Mag had selected for the service that day. How wonderful to know God cares; how bright my day became as I sang, "Breathe on me breath of God; fill me with life anew." Resurrection: facing death makes life so precious. Open yourself to signs of God's care and communication.

Resurrection: new love for life after near death; new outlook on the same old existence; new chance to trust God just for today; new reassurances that God cares. Resurrection: what a way to live!

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Debra Bender has a degree in Political Science and works as a legal secretary for a labor-employment law firm in Chicago. She loves reading and politics and tries to live each day as a precious, unearned gift from God.



*The peacock has long been a symbol of the resurrection.*

Uncluttered rooms. Minimal laundry. Food in the refrigerator. Silence. The emptiest syndrome with all its similar and unique symptoms has pervaded our home. Now, along with millions of other moms around the world, I sit here in the silence, wondering where the years have gone, missing the presence of my children and most of all seeking a sense of purpose for the days that lie ahead.

A good friend shared that she too had found this period of her life extremely painful.

It wasn't until she found a purpose outside the home that she found peace. Knowing that God was not yet finished with her restored her zest for life.

Thirty-three years after that first

helpless cry was heard in our home, our last child has gone. Looking back, I remember a day when, cradling our firstborn in my arms, I was suddenly saddened by a thought that flashed across my mind: "Some day he's going to grow up and leave me!" Foolish as it may have seemed at the time, the idea brought tears to my eyes. Thirty-three years later, he has gone. And yes, once more tears came to my eyes as I saw him vow to love another who had claimed his heart.

As I sit here, I am reminded of yet another mother whose son left her after thirty-three years. She too had been given thoughts to ponder as she held her newborn close. "A sword will strike your heart" (Luke 2:35 NKJV). Thirty-three years later, her Son was gone. A world of lost souls had claimed his heart and he had kept his vow to give his life for them that they might live.

Mary's role in the life of her Son had been important. She had nurtured, loved and taught him the rudiments of everyday life. She had been there when he scraped his knees. She had been there to teach him manners and to settle sibling disputes. She had been there to encourage, to comfort, to listen and to pray for him. And then, she had been called upon to let him go, to let God's plan for her Son be fulfilled.

Similarly, I too played a role in the life of my son. I nurtured, loved and, I hope, taught him how to survive in the big wide world. I comforted him in illness, soothed him when he was hurt, settled sibling disputes and encouraged him to try new pursuits. Most of all, I prayed that he might know God and God's plan for his life. And now, I too am called to let go and to allow that plan to be fulfilled.

Looking back at her life, I ask myself, did Mary disappear from the scene after the ascension of her Son? No. If we look closely at the book of Acts we find her very involved in the early Christian community. She continued her role as a nurturer and prayer warrior, this time helping and interceding for the apostles and the new converts.

Knowing that Mary and numerous other mothers have seen their children come and go and have survived to tell the tale, helps me. Not only does God have a plan for my son and daughters but also a plan for me that doesn't end with an empty nest. I still have a role to play in the lives of our children and others that God will bring across my path. This time it is to be a support, to lend an ear, to give advice when asked and most importantly to continue praying.

As I sit here pondering the future, a sense of excitement is tickling my spirit. None of us, as mothers, will ever have to give as much as Mary did, but she can be an example for us. Now that my nest is empty, I pray that I too will comfort and support other young moms and share the good

news of God's redeeming love. I pray that daily I will seek God's unfolding plan for my life. Most of all I pray that I will be an intercessor, lifting not only my own needs but also those of others to the throne of grace.

*I am reminded of yet another mother whose son left her after thirty-three years.*

.....  
*Patricia Earl is a free-lance writer who lives in Manotick, Ontario with her husband, Brian. They attend Knox Presbyterian Church, where they both serve as elders.*

# Thirty-three Years

by  
Patricia  
Earl

# “The Lord Brought Us Safely Over”

Translated by Dora Dueck

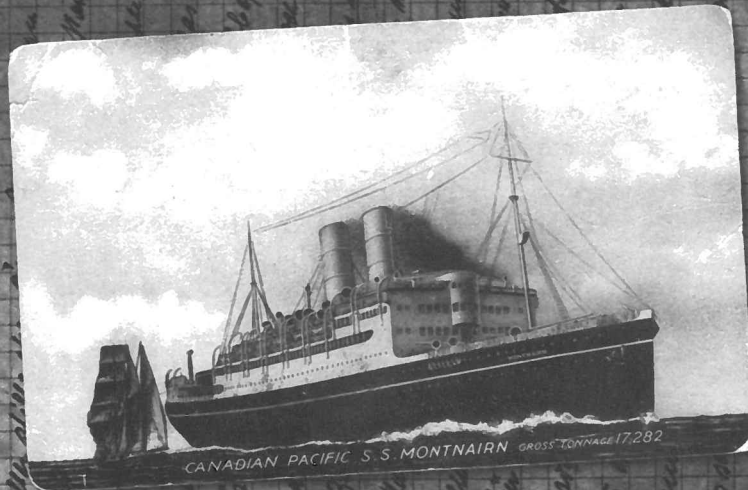
Most of us probably have a sense of the Mennonites as a migrating people. We are likely familiar (at least vaguely) with two waves of migration, the one of some 18,000 Mennonites from Russia to America in the 1870s and another one of some 20,000 from Russia to Canada in the 1920s. Our grandparents or great-grandparents may have belonged to one of these groups.

The Mennonite migrations of those years, however, were only part of a much larger phenomenon of worldwide movement that took place between the early 1800s and the Depression of the 1930s. Some 60 million people moved to a new land during that period. Most came from Europe and about half moved to the United States. The rest moved to countries such as Canada, Argentina, Brazil, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. This massive re-location is astonishing to contemplate; what a myriad of stories it contains!

Periodicals, diaries and other sources from the past draw us from that “big picture” into the lives of some of the people who uprooted themselves and moved across the ocean to what was called the New World. In my research of the first Mennonite Brethren paper, the *Zionsbote*, in the period between 1884 and 1906, I have come across many accounts of migration journeys, some of them written by women. These accounts reflected an ongoing migration trickle that occurred between the two major Mennonite migrations mentioned above, most of it by single families or small clusters of people.

Since the *Zionsbote* circulated in both Russia and

America, travel accounts were a way of letting everyone “back home” know how the trip had gone and that the writer had arrived. They often contained tips, direct or indirect, for those who might want to migrate later. They also, I think, represented the use we all make of stories, namely, to help us work through difficult passages of life. The migration account bridged the unknown and sometimes frightening gap between leaving one familiar community and arriving at a new one. Although this latter community was characterized by the strangeness of a new country, it felt more like home again



because it was usually near relatives, friends or one's church group. It was the long stretch between the two that was so troublesome, and so important, to negotiate. The travel accounts of the Zionsbote also often linked aspects of the trip to the Christian pilgrimage.

The following account was written by Maria Kroeker and appeared in the 20 August 1902 Zionsbote. It was called "Our Journey to America."

**We** departed from Russia on the 6th of April, that is from [the village of] Margenau. We had no travel companions, but we thought, people would not be able to protect us if the Lord did not protect us. At 2 o'clock we reached Prischip, bought tickets to Odessa; this cost 16 Rubel, 40 Kopeck. With God's help we arrived in Odessa on Monday. We looked at various things there, which meant a lot to us; we were there an entire day. My husband went to the [travel] agent and I stayed in a guest house with my children. I watched the bustle of the people and thought: how blind the people are; they run hither and yon and do not know what they are running after. We paid for the trip to New York and in the evening we were brought to the train and, with God's help, departed. I thought, oh if only there was such a rush to the gate of the narrow way, then it would be as it is written, namely, that some 3000 were added in one day [Acts 2]. Well, may the Lord grant that many still enter that door. We left there in the evening and came to Alexandrowo, which is the Russian border.

The next morning we travelled from there to the first German border city Ottlotschie. There we got the tickets to Antwerp; [we] also got some bad information there, but there was nothing we could do about it. We thought we would arrive April 13 in the morning, but we arrived only at 3 in the afternoon and by then the ship was gone. So we had to stay there until the next Saturday. It was the Easter week then and the time seemed very long to us. But we got through this time, though it also was quite expensive, 24 Rubel. We boarded the ship at 9 in the morning, left shortly after, and everything went well. We soon ate dinner, went up and down, but suddenly I felt so sick, I lay down in bed, but had to throw up. Oh, I thought, if this is how it will be the whole time, I don't know how I'll do it. But that is exactly how it was. We went further and further into the ocean, the water was so restless, and that is also how it was with the sickness. Sometimes it was also quite stormy, with the waves pounding over the ship. We could not get around the ship without holding on. When we lay

on our beds, it seemed as if we might suddenly fall out, the ship rocked so much. It was as if we were lying in a cradle. There was nobody of our people [Mennonites] on the ship and we were always alone. Otherwise there were many people, something like a thousand persons. But it went well and also badly on the ship. The people were all so sick, we simply could not stay below, [we had to] all go on the deck in the air. My husband was sick only three days. The children were not affected at all, for which I was glad. When I was lying on my bed I would think: Oh God, have mercy on us; if you do not bring us over, we will perish. But the Lord had mercy on us and brought us safely over.

On the 6th and 7th days of travel people were already looking to see if they could see anything. The first thing we saw was a ship, but my, what a cry: "There, there, a ship!" And when we first saw land, they screamed: "Land! Land!" Now [we knew] the dear Lord had brought us across safely. The 9th day, at 9 in the morning, we were released from the ship, God be thanked. In New York we were treated like cattle: they held us back with cords and put us behind iron bars.' But that was also fortunate, we did not know where to go, so we were imprisoned. Then, we came once more to the railway. The first day we travelled I

thought, now this is even worse than on the ship. The train swung back and forth so much that we occasionally thought it would tip over. Suddenly it was completely dark in the train. Oh, I thought, now it's over. It was so dark I could not see my children. But

soon it was light again. After we had travelled some 3 days, we travelled through a mountain again, but it stayed light enough that I could see the window. Our goal was Harvey, North Dakota. We arrived the evening of May 16. Now we were delivered from travelling. Toward the end I could hardly walk, my feet were swollen and I had such a headache that I did not know what to do with myself.

So we arrived May 17 at the brother's. We plan to stay here until autumn, then we are planning, Lord willing, to move to Saskatchewan.

I want to give notice in this way that we are in America, because we have still have parents and siblings, and friends and acquaintances in Russia.

Dear brothers and sisters in the Lord, at that time when the Lord wanted to convert me, the thought of the ten virgins, how only five of them were wise, was very meaningful to me[;] now this has become meaningful to me once again. May the Lord grant that it is always

*Continued on page 21 ►*

*Oh God, have mercy on us;  
if you do not bring us over,  
we will perish.*

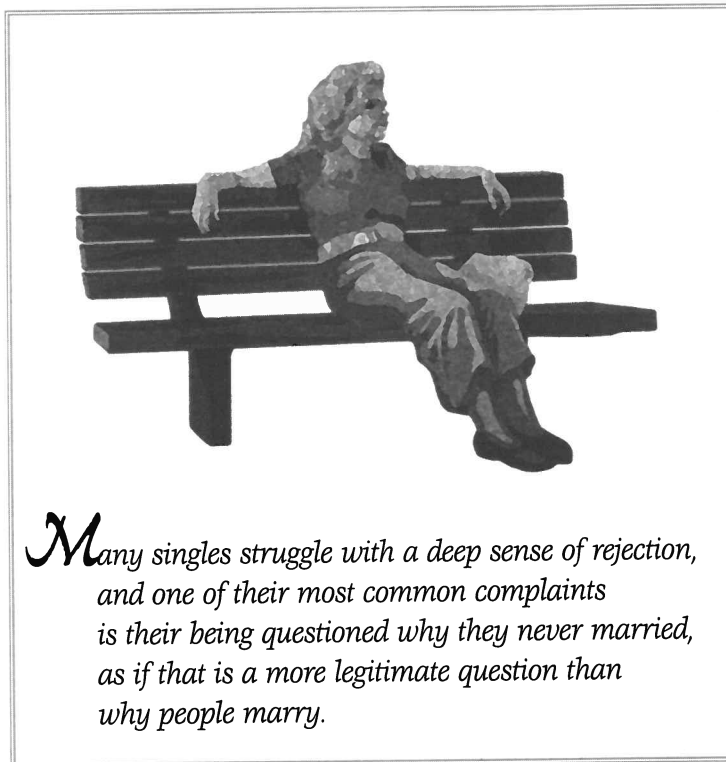
# Being Single in a Married World

by Marina Froese

**To** marry or not to marry, that is the question most of us must face at some point in our lives, but do we really feel there is a choice? Does it not seem as if the church sees marriage as the only healthy choice? Do we have to be married to have a meaningful and healthy life? We do seem to have a strong desire, and I believe a God-given desire, for the intimacy of a committed, lifelong relationship with another person, but is marriage the only context in which God provides a nurturing community? When we look around us, the success rate for marriage is rather dismal, and one would think that singleness would look more inviting. Yet people marry and remarry, hoping to fill the empty spot in their lives.

What does the Bible have to say about the single state and the strong emphasis the church gives to marriage? There are some real advantages to being single according to Scripture, and the central figure of Christianity used them to his advantage. There is no doubt that Christ honoured marriage, but he had a mission that marriage would have made impossible. The apostle Paul was another, at least in his later years, who chose the single life as the lifestyle most conducive to fulfilling the mission that God had given him. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul clearly states the advantages of singleness in furthering the kingdom of God, yet this is not for everyone, but only for those whom God calls.

When we face the decision whether or not to get married, do we seriously consider the single lifestyle? Is the single lifestyle held in as high esteem as the above examples would demand? The only way to find out is to ask those who are single, because they are the ones who feel the effects of societal and church attitudes. Many singles struggle with a deep sense of rejection, and one of their most common complaints is their being questioned why they never married, as if that is a more legitimate



*Many singles struggle with a deep sense of rejection, and one of their most common complaints is their being questioned why they never married, as if that is a more legitimate question than why people marry.*

question than why people marry. Singles are expected to have more spare time, because supposedly they do not have commitments. Sometimes they are expected to change their lifestyle in order to care for elderly parents, as if it is always easier for them than for the married siblings.

Shari Miller writes that in response to the question "When are you most aware of your singleness?" single people unanimously agreed that "they were most painfully aware of it at church.... All too often, preachers draw their sermon illustration

entirely from the nuclear family; the virtues of motherhood and fatherhood are extolled while the singles shift uneasily in their pews. Committees are comprised of the married bulwarks of the church, while singles are limited to non-decision-making positions such as Sunday school teaching. Singles are even segregated from married members of the same age in the 'singles' class." ("Singleness is a Kingdom Option," *The Messenger*, denominational paper of the Evangelical Mennonite Conference, date unknown)

We may shrug off these comments and say that singles are responsible for themselves, but we have to face our responsibility for the attitudes and behaviours that have contributed to such marginalization. We need to dig deeper to see if there is something in the way we think about ourselves, about marriage and about the church that could be responsible for this attitude. We need to turn to Scripture to see what our priorities ought to be. Jesus said in Matthew 6:33, "Strive first for the kingdom of God and for righteousness, and these other things will be given to you as well" (author's paraphrase). In Luke 14:26 we read, "If you want to be my follower, you must love me more than your own father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters – yes, more than your own life. Otherwise

you cannot be my disciple" (*New Living Translation*). What do we think is our most important role – spouse, parent, woman, etc.? – or is it being God's servant? Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen writes,

...by restoring the family to its secondary biblical place we can come a long way toward recovering a biblical respect for singleness. For despite the fact that Christians pay lip service to equal value of married and single people, their near-idolatry of the family over the past century has made single Christians feel like second-class citizens at best and moral failures at worst. But when both states are evaluated in kingdom terms, their functions are clearly complementary: a stable Christian family may have a missionary advantage in providing hospitality. But the single person, unencumbered with family duties, often has the missionary advantage of mobility. And both are vital to the spread of the church. (*Gender and Grace*, Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 1990, p 176)

So what can we do to try to bring an end to this marginalization? The story in 2 Kings 4:1-7 of the widow who came to Elijah for help in a difficult situation, gives us some clues. Her husband had died, leaving her with two sons and unpaid taxes, and the creditor had come to take her sons as slaves in payment. The first thing that Elijah did was ask her a question: "What shall I do for you?" A relationship had obviously been established prior to this meeting, and now Elijah sought to understand the widow by listening to her answer, before giving her any advice. This first step, of listening to the other empa-

thetically, is absolutely crucial in the mending of any relationships. It means that we have to set aside our own agenda, assumptions and feelings to truly hear the other person. There is a paradox here, that in order to have influence, one has to be influenced. God was so profoundly influenced by our neediness that the Son took on humanity and died on the cross in order to influence us to become Godly people. Steven Covey writes, "The more deeply you understand other people, the more you will appreciate them.... To touch the soul of another human being is to walk on holy ground" ("Seek First to Understand, Then to Be Understood," *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1989, p 258).

Only when we learn to listen to each other in this way can we start to see what needs to be done to repair broken relationships. Then, as Elijah, we can take other practical steps toward solving problems. There can be no categorizing of us (marrieds) or them (singles) in the kingdom of God, for we are all members of the community of God. Our purpose is to glorify the name of God together, and to share God's love with others so that they too may glorify God. We start by working through the ways we relate to each other, so that we may get on with the task, united in mutual respect for each other and by the bond of first allegiance to our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

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*Marina Froese lives in Steinbach, Manitoba, where she owns and operates a hog farm together with her husband, John. She is working toward her Master of Divinity degree at Providence Seminary, although, at present she is on a leave of absence for health reasons. She is the mother of three and grandmother of two.*

## Voices From The Past

*Continued from page 19*

important to us, that we do not forget what the Lord has done for us. The Lord has kept me in the faith twelve years already, to him be praise and thanks for it. I want to advise everyone to choose the narrow way. Think of the five virgins who knocked on the door. And what did they hear for the answer? Oh may the Lord keep us, that we will not be among these.

Greetings to all readers of the Zions-Bote from your sister pilgrim to the heavenly Canaan.

*Jakob and Maria Kroeker.*

1. Immigrants to the United States were processed at facilities on Ellis Island in the New York harbour; here they were, as Maria writes, grouped in pen-like enclosures to wait their turn.

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*Dora Dueck, a regular contributor to Sophia, is currently working toward a Master's degree in history at the University of Winnipeg. She and her husband are parents of three children and are members of Jubilee Mennonite Church, Winnipeg.*

# Community in a Prison Setting

by Jake Schmidt

It's Friday, July 21, 2000. Friday is the day I usually "go to jail" to spend time with the residents of Milner Ridge Correctional Centre, a provincial minimum security prison that houses both juvenile and adult offenders.

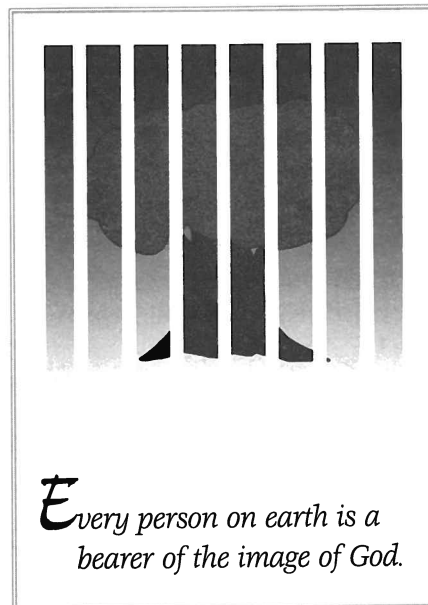
This Friday is special, though, because I'll be staying for the weekend. The chaplain of the prison, a volunteer "Sister" and I will be spending the weekend with a dozen residents who have signed up to participate in a personal-growth retreat, which includes fasting, Bible study and prayer, worship and sharing.

There is a lot of nervousness as we gather for the first session on Friday evening. Each one is asked to reflect on and share whatever he feels comfortable sharing of his goals and objectives in participating in this event. Several residents will be released very shortly, and they have some adjustments to make before moving into the community to put into practice some of the changes they have made while serving time. They need encouragement, empowerment and confidence. Others will be imprisoned for several more months and will need guidance in living in prison with the decisions they have made to travel the "faith journey." Or perhaps they still need to make that decision to follow Jesus.

As the sessions continue on Saturday, the men become more open in the sharing times that are part of the program. Most of the sharing is in the same small group of four participants and one facilitator. The openness increases and the comfort level is decidedly more apparent as time goes on. There are times of silence and

"alone time" as well, where we encourage participants to take a deep look inside to determine the needs that are present and what it will take to meet those needs. In the sharing circle in the large group, these needs are shared, discussed and prayed about, and solutions are sought that will be "for the highest good of all concerned."

The pace is quite relaxed and yet, by the end of the evening, instead



of being anxious to socialize, as had been expressed by several participants early in the retreat, the men are ready for quiet time and sleep. A lot of soul searching is going on. It's amazing what happens inside when we take a break from the regular routines of daily living. God speaks in a still small voice, and we're all listening and actually hearing what is being said.

By Sunday noon, when it comes time to break the fast, there is a bond between all who have shared in this "experimental" experience. Some men

talk about not wanting to go back into the general population. We have been isolated from the rest of the residents and the routine of that existence. When it's time for the retreat to end, we worship together. We sing and pray and read scripture. We each share how our objectives have or haven't been met. Mostly they've been exceeded. There are hugs, handshakes and well wishes as each one moves to his own private space in the general population of the prison and as the facilitators move back into their regular routine of day-to-day living.

Months later, as the last of the participants prepare for their discharge date, they still speak of the transformations that happened at the retreat and in the time that has followed.

God blessed us, and we plan to do this again next summer or fall, as the Lord leads. This was a very real and deep experience of community within what has been called by some a sub-culture.

Every person on earth is a bearer of the image of God, and when we look for it and he or she is open to finding it, that image can be discovered and celebrated, as we did, July 21 to 23, 2000, at Milner Ridge Correctional Centre.

Jake Schmidt has been a therapist/ counsellor in private practice in Winnipeg since 1975. He spends one day each week (since 1989) ministering to prisoners who wish to heal their past and make positive changes in their lives for a brighter and more hopeful future. Jake finds many beautiful people in prison who need encouragement and hope to be presented to them in a way they can understand.

## The Peony Season

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by Sarah Klassen.

(Winnipeg, Turnstone Press, 2000)

248 pages.

### Reviewed by Viola Prowse

Sarah Klassen's collection of stories are set close to home both in terms of actual physical setting and in the experiences of the characters. Familiar names to Winnipeg appear on many pages. Several stories are set in Eastern Europe and Russia, in which words from my parents' stories of their past lives leap out at me.

Many of the stories describe brief encounters with life-transforming incidents, encounters that create connections between past and present existence, between mother and daughter, teacher and students, grandchild and grandmother and between friends. Themes of separation and longing, of regret at words not said, of the temporal nature of moments of true understanding that motivate us to act and break through the barriers, flow through all the stories.

Klassen's stories show us how little we know each other and this seems especially true between generations. How much we long to know more, yet because of the "shell of silence we are careful to build around ourselves," we experience life as do Lydia and Doug in "The Divine Visitation," "eating and sleeping and thinking our own thoughts." Or as does Kate, who finds herself in the house of God, "separate from everyone, excluded from the light of the sun, alien from God." We are separated by age, by physical distances, but mainly by our own inability to share our fears, our disappointments, our needs.

An overwhelming sense of longing pervades these stories – a longing

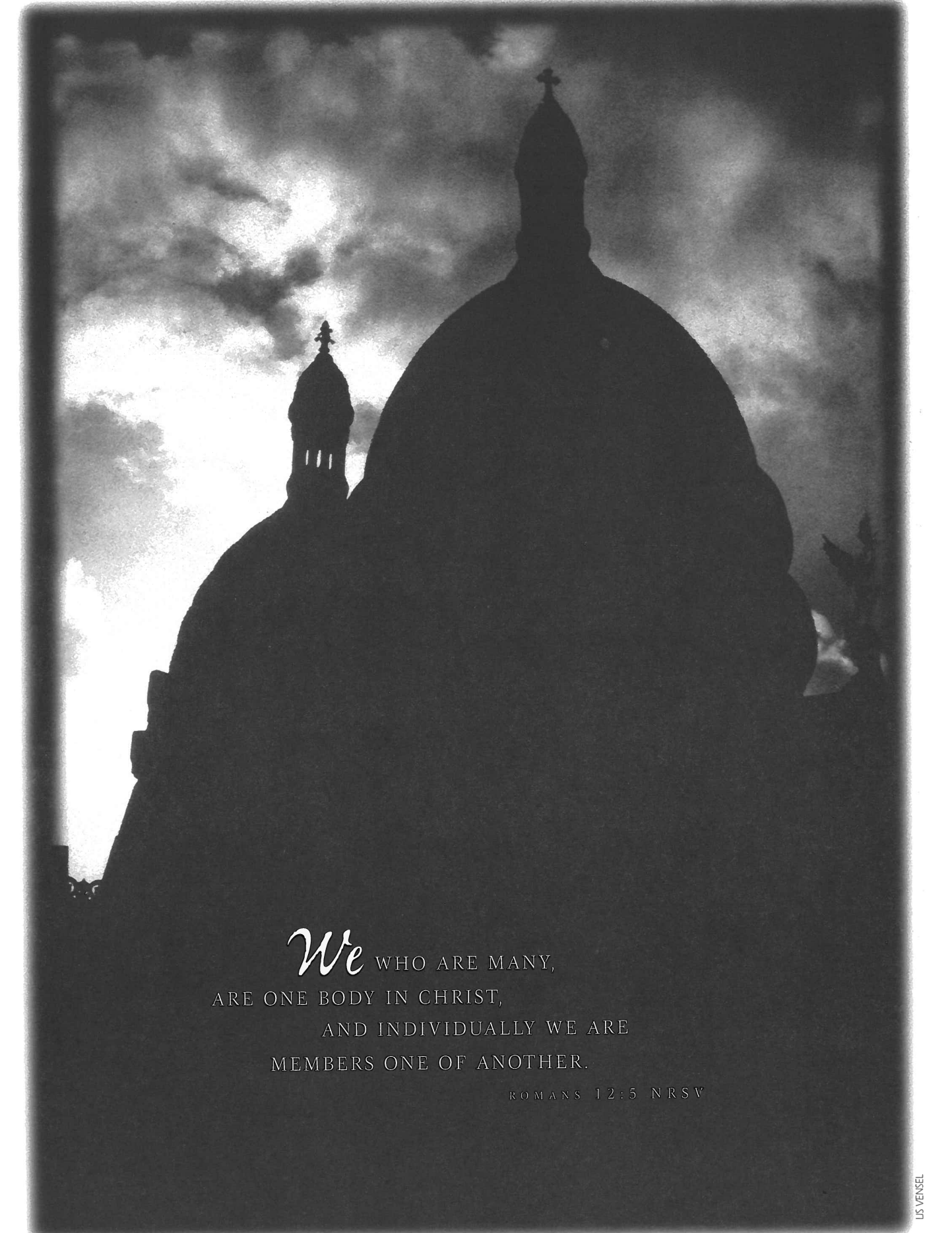
for the innocence of the "pink and white clouds of the past floating in the sunshine," before the brutality of life destroyed that beauty and peace. There is a longing to experience something beyond the ordinariness of life. There is a yearning to be needed, to be touched, to share our suffering, to understand those we love and to empathize. Nowhere was this longing more poignant for me than in "Days of Noah" and "A Time to Gather Stones." Hedwig, a young girl, begins to understand the profound separation between herself and her mother as she hears her mother's conversation with a friend, "reliving a life [she] had never known, growing up in a Russian village [she] would never see, speaking a language that shut [her] out."

*The Peony Season* aptly describes those rare moments that can transform lives, when our words surface to catch the bright sunlight and allow us to truly see each other. These moments happen when Emma's mother reaches "into a chest for something to give [her], a treasure, an inheritance" ("Murder"). The beautiful "transient glory" of those "audacious globes of flame," the peonies, comes into our lives when the little Mexican child tells Ada she has a beautiful garden and that she will come again and help her ("The Little Mexican"). Sometimes we become changed people through these chance encounters. In one of my favourites, "Picnic at Lake Sharon," Lori as a young girl unexpectedly finds herself playing a crucial role in helping the woman she had been trying to "shut out." She herself is transformed through this, no longer pulling away from her mother's affectionate hug, realizing that "[her] resolve to keep aloof seems foolish and unnecessary." These brief moments energize us. They bring us

a hope for the future like the "measure of peace" which stays with Kate and Carla when Betty and Jacqui deliver the Easter bread and actually break the silence to talk about Carla's traumatic experience.

As the characters' lives unfold, Klassen creates intriguing parallels with stories from other people's lives and gives us cause to wonder about how much we travel along the same paths without realizing it. We recognize our own "desires of the heart" in the pieces of *The Peony Season*. These stories challenge us to recognize and seize those precious moments that open pathways for understanding, compassion and even, at times, metamorphosis.

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Viola Prowse specialized in English and Library for her degree at Western University. She has served as project coordinator of a national think-tank on bringing the community into Canadian schools. Viola and her husband are the parents of five children, and they attend Church of the Way in Winnipeg.

A black and white photograph showing the silhouette of a large church dome and a smaller spire against a bright, cloudy sky. The sun is positioned behind the clouds, creating a strong backlight effect. The church structure is dark and solid, contrasting with the lighter, textured sky.

*We* WHO ARE MANY,  
ARE ONE BODY IN CHRIST,  
AND INDIVIDUALLY WE ARE  
MEMBERS ONE OF ANOTHER.

ROMANS 12:5 NRSV