



The Conrad Grebel Review

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Preface

We are pleased to offer in this issue a selection of papers and presentations from the most recent Women Doing Theology conference, together with a related Afterword and an array of book reviews. The 2003 event, titled “Gifts of the Red Tent: Women Creating,” not only dealt with women “doing theology” but also celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of the Women’s Concerns Committee of the Mennonite Central Committee US. Thus we are including papers and presentations on both subjects. Readers will encounter an engaging diversity of styles, from the formal and academic to the informal and reflective.

We extend hearty thanks to Beth Graybill and Patricia Haverstick, both formerly with the MCC US Women’s Concerns Desk, for pulling the materials together for publication and for contributing, respectively, the Introduction and Foreword. We also salute Linda Gehman Peachey, current director of the Women’s Concerns Program, and Jen Miller, for their valuable assistance as our production date drew near. The Afterword has kindly been provided by Lydia Neufeld Harder of the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre, who has a longstanding connection to the Women Doing Theology conferences.

The Conrad Grebel Review has published articles from Women Doing Theology conferences since their inception in 1993. Readers may wish to consult the Spring 1996 or Fall 2001 issues for an overview of topics and issues discussed at previous gatherings. (The next conference in the series will be held in Canada in 2006. For information, contact Linda Gehman Peachey: lgp@mcc.org.)

Upcoming CGR issues will focus on theologian John Milbank, Mennonite thinker John Howard Yoder as an historian, papers from a 2004 Mennonite graduate student conference, the Lord’s Supper, and other subjects. We invite comments, submissions for possible publication (see authors’ guidelines on inside back cover) and, of course, new subscriptions and renewals!

C. Arnold Snyder, *Academic Editor*
Stephen A. Jones, *Managing Editor*

FOREWORD

Gifts of the Red Tent: Women Creating

Patricia Haverstick

Women have always been under-represented in Anabaptist scholarship. While significant improvements have occurred in this area in recent years, and books and articles written by women have proliferated, the fact remains that not as many women as men are publishing, lecturing, teaching, and being asked to present at conferences. Therefore, the “Women Doing Theology” conference (held biennially since 1993, with the location alternating between Canada and the United States) continues to be an important event where Anabaptist women can come together to discuss theology, providing a forum for new scholarship, for discussing women-centered or -guided theology, and for encouraging younger generations to study and discuss theology.

The 2003 conference, held May 16-18 in Harrisonburg, Virginia, was attended by more than 200 men and women. It attempted to bridge the gap often found between theology and the arts, the academic and the spiritual, and white women and women of color. The theme, “Gifts of the Red Tent: Women Creating,” was loosely based on the larger themes found within the novel *The Red Tent* by Anita Diamant. The women-centered tradition of the red tent – all of the women of a family or clan, servants and enslaved women included, gathered under the red tent once a month – is a very powerful symbol of women coming together and caring for each other. The planning committee chose to focus on the themes of shelter, inter-generational storytelling, and creative skill-making found within the confines of the red tent.

From the start, the planning committee attempted to be anti-sexist and anti-racist. As Jane Hooper Piefer, a pastor and committee member, said at the opening plenary session, “We worked hard to include a ‘good mix’ of women of color and white women for speakers . . . for workshop leaders . . . etc. And yet we realized we were falling into the trap of multicultural tokenism as it applies to racism.” This led us to take a hard look at how we were doing things, and it led to some changes.

Patricia J. Haverstick was editor of the Women’s Concerns Report and served as coordinator of the 2003 Women Doing Theology conference planning committee.

One such change, which we felt actually made our conference “more” Anabaptist, was that we deviated from the traditional academic conference model of paper presentation to a paper response method that we called a “dialogical response.” This method utilized a panel of four respondents that dialoged with each other on a few guided questions regarding each paper. The responses were academic, theological, personal, and spiritual. The intent of this approach was to be more inclusive and liberating. It also recognized the Anabaptists’ founding belief that the interpretation of the Bible should occur within a community. Early Anabaptists exhibited communal and dialogical models of biblical interpretation and preaching. This type of response also honors the wisdom of women’s experiences, as well as academic knowledge, when discussing theological matters.

The main papers considered the themes of wonder, wandering, and hospitality (welcome) – each of which are found within *The Red Tent*. These themes connected well with the workshop offerings that focused more exclusively on the arts – topics such as the spirituality of dance, storytelling, and drumming. The emphasis on spirituality and the arts was also reflected in the worship and artistic responses to the major themes. The artistic responses included a one-woman play, a short dramatic piece with four actors, and a poem.

Response to the conference was very positive. The papers were well received, the workshops were well attended and enjoyed, and the artistic responses were highlights of the weekend. Participants also seemed to appreciate the work done on anti-racism. Of course, there were some criticisms and learnings for the wider church community. For one, while the work on being inclusive was approved, it was also noted that sexuality was overlooked and that there was no mention that voices of homosexuals were still possibly excluded. It also was apparent that much theological educating still needs to be done among women, particularly the younger generation. There seems to be an absence of knowledge of the basics of women-centered theologies (i.e., Feminist, Womanist, and Mujerista). For example, the wisdom tradition, or “Sophia,” was mentioned in each of the main papers yet many in the audience did not recognize the concept.

The need for continuing education of Anabaptist young people – in this case, particularly young women – shows that the Women Doing Theology conference must continue. As you read these papers from the 2003 conference, I hope you will be inspired to attend and participate in the 2006 conference.

INTRODUCTION

Gifts of the Red Tent: Women Creating

Beth Graybill

In 2003, the Committee for Women's Concerns of the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) commemorated thirty years of existence. Formally launched as the bi-national Task Force on Women in Church and Society at a meeting of MCC's Peace Section in Ottawa in 1973, it divided into separate US and Canada steering committees in 1975. As those of us in the audience at the Women Doing Theology meetings listened to the founders share their stories of birthing MCC Women's Concerns, we admired and applauded their courage, pain, fortitude, and hope.

The founders of the Committee for Women's Concerns have much to celebrate. Their drive and vision helped to bring women's issues to the fore in the life of the Mennonite Church, and to mobilize a response on key issues. Within the first year-and-a-half they had planned two major conferences – “The Interdependence of Men and Women,” a study conference at Camp Friedenswald in Michigan, and a women and politics seminar held in Washington, DC. They had also published several issues of the newsletter, *Women's Concerns Report*, as well as an edited collection of writings by and about women entitled “Persons Becoming” (followed in 1980 by a second collection entitled “Which Way Women”). In addition, they had completed a study on Women and Work, examining MCC's employment policies and practices, and had contacted deans and department heads at Mennonite colleges, encouraging them to promote the study of women in church and society. (Indeed, Goshen College in Indiana recently commemorated twenty-five years of its Women's Studies minor.) This is an impressive workload for paid staff, let alone for a volunteer group of women who were taking on these responsibilities in addition to other commitments.

Strategically, the founders of MCC Women's Concerns – most notably Dorothy Yoder Nyce and Luanne Habegger (Martin) – sought to locate their program under the rubric of MCC's peace initiatives, rather than as a separate

Beth Graybill was formerly Director of MCC US Women's Concerns and a member of the 2003 Women Doing Theology conference planning committee.

family life initiative (the only space formerly open to women's work though the 1950s and 1960s in the Mennonite Church in North America). This allowed women's issues to be situated in the core of peacemaking rather than occupying a marginalized position.

The founders also benefited from male allies who lent critical initial support to their venture. Minutes from the March 1973 meeting note that the almost entirely male board was "grateful" to its women members (the two representatives from the church's women's organizations) and to the other women presenters (theologian Dorothy Yoder Nyce and MCC staff member Luann Habegger) for having "*sensitized the male members to faulty use of language, distorted values, inadequate Biblical interpretation, and discrimination against women in church and societal structures.*" The Peace Section board "*accepts the challenge to place women's interests on its continuing agenda and supports bringing these concerns to the attention of the church via a variety of forms and offers its resources for such.*" That after one hearing the board would be willing not only to support church-wide dissemination but also to authorize resources toward this initiative speaks either to the persuasiveness of the women, the openness of the men, or the moving of the Spirit. The board then proceeded to appoint the Peace Section administrative assistant, Ted Koontz, to pursue these goals. The irony that much of the logistical work of coordinating phone calls, organizing meetings, and typing minutes of the women's task force fell to a man was not lost on the women.

The Women's Concerns founders were working for some things that today we take for granted: language that avoids exclusive use of the male pronoun, curriculum that avoids gender stereotypes, and equal opportunities for women in employment, including within church agencies. And they worked on issues still facing opposition in the Mennonite church today: female language and imagery for God, and the paucity of women in leadership positions in pastoral ministry and in many church agencies.

While the concerns were never exclusive to white women – indeed, one of the first projects was raising funds to send a representative to the first United Nations women's conference in Mexico City – the steering committee was composed of white ethnic Mennonite women from the US and Canada whose primary focus was on overcoming the overt sexism they encountered

in the church. Through the 20-20 vision of hindsight, the Committee for Women's Concerns, like other women's organizations of the day, gave inadequate attention to the double oppression experienced by Mennonite women of color. File photos of meetings from the early period show few Black and no Latina women in attendance at board meetings or wider gatherings, a situation which we are now working hard to correct.

Since the hiring of paid part-time staff in the US and Canada to do the work of MCC Women's Concerns, beginning in the mid-1980s, our vision has broadened. Here in the US at present, including and privileging voices of Mennonite women of color remains our challenge. Bi-nationally, the work around preventing family violence and pastoral misconduct in the churches – begun about fifteen years ago – has borne much fruit through educational conferences (including one in the US in Spanish for Latina Mennonites in 2001), outreach on the issue to conference leaders, print materials, and now a web site (www.mcc.org/abuse). Today my desk receives relatively few calls for assistance in processing charges of pastoral sexual misconduct. I like to believe this is because Mennonite and Brethren in Christ conferences now have clear grievance and accountability policies in place, and persons in positions of oversight willing to pursue charges. But it may also be a case of fatigue around this issue. Ultimately, Mennonite women need to be empowered to resist and report abuse. We continue to be involved in trying to articulate an Anabaptist theology opposing violence against women as a way to legitimize and foster women's ability to resist.

As the outgoing MCC Women's Concerns director, I have been privileged to follow in the steps of this inspiring legacy. Part of the task remaining is to work at subtler forms of sexism, including those limitations that we have internalized, which manifest themselves through gossip, self-blame, and isolation. Too often women in oppressive situations view it as a personal problem (Why can't I figure out how to juggle the demands of my job and being the primary parent for my child?), rather than a systemic one (How do jobs in church agencies need to be restructured – e.g., with less weekend travel – to enable women and men not to sacrifice family time to do them?). And finally, Jesus' reminder that the most important thing is to love our neighbor as our self requires adequate self-love, care, and personal development. We need to continually reflect on how we can become better allies to ourselves, to other women, and to men.

A Theology of Wonder

Malinda Elizabeth Berry

Introduction

The other weekend some friends and I wandered into a conversation about theology. The pressing question was this: What does it mean to “think theologically”? This past semester, one of my courses was a study of Karl Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*, and so with Barth on the brain, I answered the question by saying that thinking theologically means engaging in a kind of God-talk that takes revelation seriously because one believes that the Living Christ changes one’s perception of reality. That was easy enough. But one of my conversation partners was dissatisfied. He did not see how thinking theologically is any different from his normal thought patterns as a committed Christian who tries to treat others as he would want to be treated, showing kindness and compassion to everyone he encounters. “That’s thinking *ethically*,” I countered. But after several more minutes of the same thing, we recognized we were at an impasse. I cannot say that I gained any great insights from that conversation, but now I do have a stronger conviction that as Anabaptist Christians we need to be much more self-conscious about thinking theologically. We need to think both about what theology *is* and how we *do* theology.

In his survey of Western Christianity’s understanding of the theologian’s task, Robert King observes,

The [theological] tradition we have received has evolved over time, and we ourselves contribute to its further development by the way in which we appropriate and apply it. We had therefore best take responsibility for what we say and the way in which we say it. That is especially true if what we seek is a “systematic theology,” for whatever else that term may mean, it surely connotes a deliberate ordering of ideas, the self-conscious articulation of a theological position.¹

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The last part of this quotation is important to me because I am working on a degree in theology at a seminary that calls this concentration systematic theology (as opposed to biblical, dogmatic, fundamental, and practical theologies). Systematics places a priority on working through theological questions and issues in a systematic way. A concise definition says: “Systematic theology is the intellectual discipline that seeks to express the content of a religious faith as a coherent body of propositions.”² Making sense of the biblical witness, church history, and human experience by using them to give an account of what we believe and how we describe the nature of our faith and the commitments that flow from our belief: this is what I call the task and goal of systematic theology. We now turn to a brief survey of the Christian tradition.

The Place of Tradition

The Patristic Period (c. 100–451)

The beginning of a systematizing process in theological reflection can be traced back to the second and third centuries with the work of Justin Martyr (c. 100–c. 165), Irenaeus (c. 130–c.200), Origen (c. 185–c.254), and Tertullian (c. 160–c. 225). Then in the fourth century, significant theological work was being done by Athanasius (c. 296–c. 373) and Augustine (354–430) in the West and to the East, the Cappadocian fathers: Basil of Caesarea (c. 300–379), Gregory of Nazianzen (329–389), and Gregory of Nyssa (c. 330–c. 395). With the goal of addressing Greek philosophy, making clear distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable Christian teachings, and outlining the first systems of Christian doctrine, these men charted the course for sustained reflection on Christianity and its teachings. In their appeals to scripture and dialogues with philosophical viewpoints, these “church fathers” were engaged in debates about the nature of the church, the nature of Jesus Christ, the implications of the Constantinization of Christianity, the teachings deemed heretical, and eventually the division of the church into the East and the West. Their approach to doing theology was confessional and apologetic: they produced statements to provide the church with thoughtful treatises that justified Christian faith in the face of critics and detractors.

Of the theologians named above, it was Augustine who had the most impact on the direction of Western Christian thought. King identifies four

features of Augustine's theologizing that are part of the paradigm he calls the "Augustinian synthesis": (1) the use of a narrative structure to interpret history as a story that includes both the history of a particular people and their place in the history of the wider world – God is the one who determines the outcome of that story or sacred history; (2) reliance on the principle of God's divine sovereignty and its connection to governance, intervention, and causality; (3) dividing history into specific periods of time and describing revelation as something that has happened in the past; and (4) Augustine's belief that the theologian's task is to generate a systematized theology composed of doctrines that deal with "the major moments or motifs in this sacred history."³

The Middle Ages (c. 1000–c. 1500)

Augustine's principle of theology as "faith seeking understanding" was foundational for Medieval theologians like Anselm of Canterbury (c.1033–1109), Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274), Duns Scotus (c. 1265–1308), William of Ockham (c. 1285–1347), and Erasmus of Rotterdam (c. 1469–1536). They represent the scholastic and humanist strains of theology that built on the Augustinian tradition. In addition to working with the biblical texts, these thinkers incorporated Aristotelian philosophy into their answers to questions and issues raised in their context. The human power to reason gained new importance as logic and metaphysics became the main way one established presuppositions for doing theology. Thomas Aquinas clearly exemplifies this methodological approach in his voluminous *Summa Theologiae*.

Some serious implications of this heightened attention to reason are worth mentioning. First, reason becomes a portal through which we can *know* certain things about God (i.e., traits like omnipotence, omniscience, eternity) while we can apprehend things about God's characteristics and activities through revelation (God's self-disclosure) that leads to higher knowledge (i.e., Trinitarian nature of God's being, creation of the world, rationale for hierarchies). Second, this revealed knowledge of God is the perfection of all knowledge. Third, and most problematic from a feminist perspective, there is a hierarchy of reason that corresponds to a hierarchy of being, and we all know where women end up in this kind of scheme! I am not arguing against the use of reason in theological reflection. Indeed, developed, sound reason is a vital part of any kind of reflection. I am alerting us to some historical assumptions about who has the best capacity to reason and how that capacity is measured.

The Reformation (c. 1500–c. 1700)

The sixteenth century was the age of religious reform in Europe. The theological motivation behind much of this reform activity was to give witness to personal faith experiences interpreted through the Bible, not to build systems based on reasoned metaphysical arguments. Martin Luther (1483–1546) argued and preached for an understanding of the biblical message that salvation comes only from God. It does not come from good works; rather salvation is found through justification. John Calvin (1509–1564), the leading reformer in Geneva, assembled a systematic theology, the *Institutes of Christian Religion*. Following the outline of the Apostles' Creed, he used Augustine's understanding of history as salvation history (a motif downplayed by medieval theologians) to discuss God, who is creator and sovereign; Christ, who is mediator and redeemer; the Holy Spirit, who does the work of justifying and sanctifying; and the church as it relates to civil society.

Because of the persecution, suppression, and martyrdom that Anabaptists experienced, they did not have the opportunity to make an academic contribution to theology in the same way Luther and Calvin (and, to a lesser extent, Ulrich Zwingli [1484–1531]) did. What can be noted are the core critiques of and alternative understandings to other reformers that Anabaptists taught. C. Arnold Snyder identifies elements of an Anabaptist core despite the many and varied expressions of Anabaptism throughout continental Europe at the time. First, the sixteenth-century Anabaptists were theologically orthodox, which meant that they accepted Christendom's creeds and symbols. Second, they shared the views and reforming impulses of others regarding the sacraments, clergy (priesthood of all believers), the authority of scripture (*sola scriptura*), and the importance of "salvation by grace through faith" (*sola gracia, sola fide*). Third, there was also a cluster or core of distinctively Anabaptist doctrinal emphases⁴:

1. a pneumatology (belief about the activity of the Holy Spirit) emphasizing the internal working of the Spirit that inspired and sustained the life of faith;
2. a sense that divine authority is found both in the Spirit and Letter of scripture (*sola scriptura* with a pneumatological emphasis);
3. a soteriology (belief about salvation) whereby "the faith that would lead to salvation was a faith that bore visible fruit in repentance, conversion, regeneration, obedience, and a new life dedicated to the love of God and the neighbour"⁵;

4. a belief in a disciple's relationship to the inner working of the Holy Spirit that leads to fruitful living (faith and works);
5. an anthropology based on principles of free will, yieldedness (*Gelassenheit*), and grace; and
6. an ecclesiology (beliefs about the nature of the church) that held strongly to the church as the visible body of Christ, adult water baptism upon confession of faith, church discipline (the ban), celebration of the Lord's Supper as a commitment to loving the neighbor as the self, and mutual aid.

Contemporary Mennonite scholars do not all agree on the historical accuracy of this core or what it means for us theologically.⁶ Given this debate, I have a question for you to ponder: How much are these distinctives part of your identity as an Anabaptist woman in the twenty-first century?

The Modern Era (c. 1700–the present)

Along with the Enlightenment of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, movements that have heavily influenced the modern era include colonization and imperialism, romanticism, Marxism, liberalism, modernism, fundamentalism, freedom movements, feminism, and postmodernism, to name just a few. The Enlightenment had a huge impact on the world of ideas, and today we still struggle with the burdensome legacy inherited from the so-called “dead white European men.” This era saw the rise of the scientific worldview that laughed at miracles, modern philosophy that turned from the known world to the knowing subject, and a new historical consciousness that sought to deal only in the verifiable facts of history.

In response, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) offered Christians a new paradigm for doing theology and understanding themselves in relationship to God. The primary principle and starting point was not sacred or salvation history but what he called religious self-consciousness. This principle involves an awareness of our absolute dependence on God, the ethical implications of faith as we are in relationship with others, and the interplay of these two types of consciousness. For Schleiermacher, not every doctrine included in a previous system need be included in a contemporary formulation or account of the Christian faith.⁷

G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831) developed a philosophical system that helped transform the understanding of history from time into a concept. History has

become a dynamic, dialectical process marked by struggle, conflict, risk, and movement toward a higher end. Hegel argued that Adam and Eve's fall from paradise did not happen as provable, historical fact; rather the story represents the truth about humankind and the universal condition of history: our lives and struggle come from our sense of alienation, a theme later reinterpreted by Karl Marx.⁸

Both Schleiermacher and Hegel contributed to systematizing theology. Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), on the other hand, was opposed to trying to neatly manage Christianity in a system. Religious truth, he believed, is primarily subjective and therefore is only found when one turns inward. To take the “leap of faith” is to make a passionate choice for personal commitment. Nothing, not rational arguments, metaphysical systems, or dialectics of history can change the fact of this choice. This line of argument leads to the “subjective turn” of theology. Rather than trying to justify the faith, theology's task is to clarify the commitment to and prepare the way for faith.⁹

My cursory survey shows what the Christian tradition has meant by “thinking theologically.” I have not mentioned the varieties of liberation theologies, because I want us to understand that the tradition is still dominated by men's voices and thoughts that give a great deal of attention to philosophical explanations of Christian faith. I believe their work demonstrates their love, knowledge, and enjoyment of God. I also believe Rosemary Radford Ruether is right when she observes, “God did not just speak once upon a time to a privileged group of males in one part of the world, making us ever after dependent on the codification of their experience.”¹⁰

Let me add something else to my earlier statement about the task and goal of systematic theology. As Anabaptist women doing theology, we ought to see it as a creative process interested in recovering the sense of wholeness, unity, and integrity of our Christian witness. This involves identifying and articulating what is at the center of our faith, and this is an individual and corporate endeavor. How do we do this? James Cone talks about theology as loving God with our minds. Ellen Charry describes theology as knowing, loving, and enjoying God better.

When we turn ourselves to doing theology, we do so with all our being. Cone is drawing on the Shema that declares we are to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength (Deuteronomy 6:4–6) and also to love our

neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 22:36–40). Likewise, Charry’s sense of knowing, loving, and enjoying God better encompasses the range of human emotions as we sort through the pieces of our lives and bring them before God so that God might knit them together in new ways. Both these ways of thinking help me believe that even with all this history and tradition behind, beneath, and above me, there is still theological work I can do. We can never be done loving God, knowing God, or enjoying God even as we argue with God. To do this kind of work requires a willingness to ask questions and struggle with possible answers. What do we say “Yes” to? What we say “No” to? How ought we use the history and tradition that face us every time we open a book on theology, let alone the Bible?

A Theology of Wonder

It is important to determine if and how the biblical text speaks to the questions and concerns I am raising. I approach the Bible as someone who is trying to sort out what it seems to be saying to me and my community. When I went to the Bible in this case (or rather the Bible Windows computer program!), I looked in the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek New Testament, the Revised Standard Version of the Bible (RSV), and New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NRSV) to determine how the word “wonder” is used.

Two words in Hebrew can be translated as “wonder”: *mepeth* and *pala*. *Mepeth* has a variety of meanings including sign, miracle, and omen. It appears 36 times, 19 of which are in relation to the signs Moses and Aaron performed as they tried to get God’s point across to Pharaoh to “Let my people go!” For example, in Exodus 7:9 (NRSV) God says to Moses, “When Pharaoh says to you, ‘Perform a wonder,’ then you shall say to Aaron, ‘Take your staff and throw it down before Pharaoh, and it will become a snake.’” In addition to the Exodus tradition, *mepeth* is part of OT prophetic literature. The meanings in this context are more complicated than in the Exodus event;¹¹ these signs and wonders were not always a good thing. *Pala* appears 13 times, most frequently in the Psalms, and conveys a sense of something being different and remarkable in a way rising above “the power of human knowledge and imagination.”¹² The psalmist writes, “I will call to mind the deeds of the LORD; I will remember your wonders of old” (Psalm 77:11). This kind of

wonderment seems to point toward awe of, and reverence for, God's power. But it is not simply God's omnipotence that the people praise. Israel praises God for being delivered from slavery, for God preserving Israel as a people. The community celebrates God's wondrous acts that prove God is indeed ruler of the world.¹³

Turning to the Greek, I found the words *thaumastos*, which means "wonderful, [or] astonishing" and *teras* often paired with *semeion*, "sign." *Teras* means "miracle, wonder, miraculous sign, [or] portent." I also found that *thaumazo*, which means to "be amazed, [or] be astonished," is often translated as wonder or wonderful.¹⁴ Words in this cluster appear about 67 times in the LXX and 66 in the NT. In both, *thaumastos* is used adjectively to describe God's marvelous deeds. Franz Annen explains that within the four Gospels *thaumazo* is used differently by each author. Mark uses *thaumazo* sparingly; Matthew uses it more, especially when he describes people's positive reactions to Jesus' miracles. In John, the people astonished are not Jesus' disciples and followers but those who are skeptical of his works. *Thaumazo* appears most frequently in Luke's gospel. "From the birth of Jesus (2:18, 33), to his resurrection (24:12, 41) his life and work evoke astonishment. There is astonishment at his preaching in Nazareth (4:22), at individual miracles (8:25; 11:14), and in response to his entire work (9:43). . . . However, it is not yet identical with authentic faith (cf. esp. 4:22; 9:43)."¹⁵

These words are also used in Job. "And if I lift myself up, thou dost hunt me like a lion, and again work wonders against me" (Job 10:16 RSV). How can the same words be used to describe the salvific power of God's signs, wonders, and miracles and be part of Job's experience with suffering? Job and his friends Eliphaz and Elihu debate the meaning of God's wondrous works. Eliphaz declares, "As for me, I would seek God, and to God I would commit my cause. God does great things and unsearchable, marvelous things without number," including sending rain to water the fields, protecting those who mourn, providing relief for the poor (Job 5:8–16). But for Job, God's signs are only signs of God's power, not of God's goodness. Later, Elihu urges Job to "consider the wondrous works of God. Do you know how God lays God's command upon them, and causes the lightning of the cloud to shine? Do you know the balancings of the clouds, the wondrous works of the one whose knowledge is perfect...?" (Job 37:14b–16).

Because there is not a one-to-one translation of these five words into the same English word, I did a quick search in the RSV and NRSV translations and found that the related words appeared quite often.

	RSV	NRSV
wonder, -ful, -s, wondrous, -ly	156	98
amaze, -ing, -ment, -d	37	49
sign, -s	315	252
miracle, -s	13	11
marvel, -s, -lous, -lously	71	13
<i>Total</i>	592	423

What can we learn from the Bible's use of marvel, miracle, amazement, signs, and wonder? From the perspective of the Hebrew Bible and Old Testament, "God's mighty acts do not automatically engender confidence and hope on the part of human beings. The people must meet with a readiness to accept and rely on them as manifestations of God's enduring benevolence and power to act."¹⁶ Dennis Quinn offers an additional observation that keeps in mind the scope of the entire Bible:

It should be noted that the wonder-signs of God are real events that point to some future or otherwise hidden event or meaning. In other words, as the patristic and medieval commentators often noted, the actual events recorded in the Bible are capable of signifying something beyond the event. The miraculous character of the signs reveals the presence of God but not to those not inclined by faith to see God in the miracles – as was the case with Pharaoh in Exodus [whose heart was hardened at the sight of these things]. More important is the meaning of the wonder-signs – the mysteries they adumbrate.¹⁷

This is certainly the case in the New Testament, where we read of the miracles Jesus performed.

After Jesus had left [the district of Tyre and Sidon], he passed along the Sea of Galilee, and he went up the mountain, where he sat down. Great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame,

the maimed, the blind, the mute, and many others. They put them at his feet, and he cured them, so that the crowd was amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the maimed whole, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel (Matthew 15:29–31 NRSV).

Taking Stock of What Wonder Is

I began to seriously consider and wonder about “wonder” while enrolled in a course on the intersections between worship and the arts. Each student was asked to develop a question and then attend arts events and performances with that question in mind. My question was: What are the things in the arts and worship that create a sense of wonder and awe? As I worded my question, I was not working from a blank slate. In a previous seminar, a classmate encouraged us to approach film and fiction by allowing ourselves to feel wonder as our first reaction rather than immediately trying to make meaning out of the experience. Borrowing from Susan Sontag’s “Against Interpretation,”¹⁸ he argued that if we don’t avoid this pitfall we run the risk of shrouding art by not actually seeing the thing for what it truly is. I felt the challenge to engage art and nurture the creative life from a place that is “against interpretation.” As I wrote my reflection papers, I saw a pattern emerging: feeling a sense of wonder involves our being drawn into the new and alternative world created by a work of art. At one level, wonder urges us to be in touch with what happened to us while we were in that other world. We may not always be transformed or changed in a dramatic way, but can we begin to describe what we felt, thought, or knew while we were in that other “universe”?

I have come to the conclusion that wonder is a multifaceted concept and thus seemingly complex. However, experientially we find there is a refreshing and life-giving simplicity at the heart of wonderment. For us to feel a sense of wonder – a new sense of awe, depth, mystery, and possibility – we must be drawn into the world created by our art and, in the case of Christian faith, a re-visioned world in which all things are made new: to have a theology of wonder.

How does this fit with the biblical witness of wonder? “Wonder excites, disturbs, agitates; it seizes the attention and stimulates the effort to find an answer.”¹⁹ The texts using the language of wonder show that God’s activities

create this kind of excitement, disturbance, and agitation. People wanted to know what those signs and marvels meant. Imagine yourself as one of those lowly shepherds on that night the sky was filled with a marvelous light created by a band of God's messengers. What would you have done if you were doing the family's laundry on the day the Nile turned as red as blood? Can you fathom watching your neighbor's brother walk out of his grave the way Martha and Mary's did? The world of the Bible invites us to look for how God's purposes are being worked out. The challenge of wonder is whether we are ready to look out at our own world with the same sense of anticipation that God is going to make something happen.

If you turn in *Hymnal: A Worship Book* to Number 1, what words are printed on that page?

What is this place where we are meeting? Only a house the earth its floor,
walls and roof sheltering people, windows for light, an open door.

Yet it becomes a body that lives when we are gathered here, and know our
God is near.

Words from afar, stars that are falling, sparks that are sown in us like seed.
Names for our God, dreams, signs, and wonders sent from the past are what we need.
We in this place remember and speak again what we have heard:
God's free redeeming word.

And we accept bread at this table, broken and shared, a living sign.
Here in this world, dying and living, we are each other's bread and wine.
This is a place where we can receive what we need to increase:
God's justice and God's peace.²⁰

This hymn invites us to move into our religious and theological imagination and be astonished that God can make us a body, grow faith in us, and give us hope that the world will know God's peace, justice, and freedom. Developing a theology of wonder involves approaching our faith and beliefs in a way that allows us to be stirred by the astonishing and wondrous claims we are making. The MCC poster created by Howard Zehr and Joel Kauffman reads, "Jesus was once asked for this support of the death penalty. His reply, 'Let one who is without sin cast the first stone.'" To some, this statement may sound like moral exhortation. To others, a positive political platform. When we approach it from the perspective of wonder, we are stopped in our tracks by these unexpected words. In that moment, we look down and see a large stone

clasped in our hand and we look up and see many other stones in many other hands some aimed at us, some aimed at our enemies, some aimed at our friends. We have a choice to make: Will we drop those stones?

The question I just asked leads me to a propositional statement: God intends for all that is in the world to be reconciled to Godself through the establishment of God's kin-dom, which is established through our love of God, self, and neighbor and God's gifts of peace, justice, and freedom. There are many ways I could document or attempt to "prove" this proposition, but I will simply point to Mary's Magnificat as a example of God's self-disclosure or revelation, in which we are invited to imagine a world of peace, freedom, and justice. I approach my claim and Mary's song by looking toward the horizon of a new day that his beginning to dawn as I scan the skies for signs of hope and wonder.

Artist, author, poet, and pastor Jan Richardson has helped me find my way to this place. She writes,

So many things disguise themselves as hope. So much crosses our threshold, promising change or relief from present circumstances, that sometimes it becomes difficult to tell the difference between a reasonable hope and a misguided delusion. . . . Hope becomes easier to recognize when we learn that it rarely comes from outside us. More often it comes from within, emerging from the place where our deepest longings meet our willingness to make them real. In that place, hope sheds its disguises, moving with grace and freedom to point us beyond our delusions toward the landscape of possibility.²¹

The struggle of God's self-disclosure being birthed in this world – new life and new meaning when so much militates against it – is also the personal struggle of faith as we imagine the world as it ought to be and as we seek to find our place in what God is doing to establish the kin-dom.

The fact of women's participation in God's revelatory process affects our understanding of revelation. Consider Gabriel's message to Mary (Luke 1:26-38), Mary's Song (Luke 1:46-55), and her acceptance of motherhood as she chose to be obedient to God's revelatory design and intention using four markers of revelation.²²

1. PROMISE: the disclosure of God's intention toward us.
“And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.” (Luke 1:31)
2. COMMANDMENT: the disclosure of God's will which lays claim on us.
“He will be great, and will be called the Song of the Most High. . . .” (Luke 1:32a)
3. COVENANT: the disclosure of God's commitment to us.
“He has helped his servant Israel . . . according to the promise he made to our ancestors.” (Luke 1:54a, 55)
4. SALVATION: the disclosure of God's power at work among us.
“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior . . . for the Mighty One has done great things for me. . . .” (Luke 1:47, 49a)

I have only scratched the surface with these brief citations, but the possibilities for more parallels are plentiful. By incorporating Mary's role as the original embodiment of the *in utero* incarnate God into the Christ event, we see that God's revelation is inclusive of, and relies on, women. Furthermore, embodiment has taken place in a woman's body as well as a man's, showing a unity of God's Word (masculine) and Wisdom (feminine). This also broadens the authoritative impact of the Bible and the times and places of God's revelatory messages being made known to us. I am not romanticizing pregnancy, nor am I saying being pregnant is the only way women have participated in God's self-disclosure! To be sure, Christianity has held that childbearing is the only way women can be made worthy of God's redemption. (And with the story of Hagar in Genesis, pregnancy has some bitter consequences.) When the infant Jesus is presented at the Temple, the prophetess Anna joins Simeon in praising God and the arrival of God's salvation. Together they declare “a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel” (Luke 2:32 NRSV).

The Wonder of God in Dancing Trinity

But who is this God who is being revealed? This is the One who is Three. As feminist theologian Anne Clifford points out, “God in Christianity is not a transcendent monad, but a living and loving community of three profoundly related to one another and to the world.”²³ I have not always been Trinitarian,

for a number of reasons, but they all boiled down to my ignorance of how theologians have explained what the Trinity is. Initially, my anti-Trinity campaign was based on the way Christians uncritically accepted the maleness of God, which I still believe is a legitimate concern. Clifford notes, “Maleness projected onto the triune God of Christian revelation ignores the potential for a Trinitarian theology that relates to feminist values, such as solidarity in diversity, the value of equal and mutual partnerships, and the importance of communion to being a fully human person.”²⁴ This kind of projection is still a serious theological problem in our churches, but we have theological tools to dismantle the male edifice of God.

Catherine Mowry LaCugna’s work is one of those tools. In *God for Us: The Trinity and the Christian Life*, she explains why “the doctrine of the Trinity, which is the specifically Christian way of speaking about God, summarizes what it means to participate in the life of God through Jesus Christ in the Spirit.”²⁵ As she traces the history of Trinitarian doctrine, she describes how “a unitarian, patriarchal, monarchical, hierarchical theism gradually replaced a Trinitarian monotheism, with disastrous political results.” Without the theological understanding of an egalitarian, balanced theism, “Christian theologians justified every kind of hierarchy, exclusion and pattern of domination, whether religious, sexual, political clerical, racial, as ‘natural’ and divinely intended.”²⁶

In this context, I want to highlight LaCugna’s discussion of the Divine *Perichoresis*. In the eighth century, John of Damascus first used the Greek term *perichoresis* to describe the internal relationships of the First, Second, and Third persons of the Trinity. John offered this model to respond to debates raging in his context. He wanted to express his sense that “the three divine persons mutually inhere in one another, draw life from one another, ‘are’ what they are by relation to one another. . . . Each divine person is irresistibly drawn to the other, taking his/her existence from the other, containing the other in him/herself, while at the same time pouring self out into the other.”²⁷ To make this concept more concrete, LaCugna notes, all kinds of impersonal analogies have been used, from lamps in houses to three-dimensional objects.

This is why the image of “the divine dance” has been used to translate *perichoresis*. . . . Choreography suggests the partnership of movement, symmetrical but not redundant, as each dancer

expresses and at the same time fulfills him/herself towards the other. In the inter-action and inter-course, the dancers (and observers) experience one fluid motion of encircling, encompassing, permeating, enveloping, outstretching. There are neither leaders nor followers in the divine dance, only an eternal movement of reciprocal giving and receiving, giving again and receiving again.²⁸

The God being revealed to us is one who dances – perhaps even under the canopy of a Red Tent.

Listen to Peter’s Pentecost sermon from Acts 2:17-19 (NRSV/RSV). While the tone is quite apocalyptic, his words are full of creative possibility:

“In the last days it will be,” God declares, “that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your [youth] shall see visions, and your [elders] shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist.”

Remember, there is power in the blood of the Red Tent as well.

The Wonder of Incarnation and Christ-Sophia

Revelation is a major topic in Christian theology because it deals with the centrality and uniqueness of Jesus as the ultimate self-disclosure of God. Jann Aldredge-Clanton reminds us that “Christian theology does not limit Christ to the lifetime of the historical Jesus. Christ, like God, is eternal, existing from the beginning and acting to begin creation. For many centuries after the life and death of Jesus, theologians debated and struggled with formulas and creeds to express the relationship between God and Christ.” Rosemary Radford Ruether questions the anthropological assumptions we make when we identify the “Son” as the full and final self-disclosure of the “Father.” She asks, “Can a Male Savior Save Women?”²⁹ After describing the historical background and “patriarchalization” of christology, Ruether offers some alternative christological approaches,³⁰ ending with a proposal for a feminist christology.

Ruether challenges the notion that Jesus understood himself as the end-all-and-be-all of God’s self-disclosure. She argues that Jesus was not

proclaiming his message in a way that evoked the kingship of a Davidic Messiah. This Davidic tradition, she says, is Judean in origin and therefore would have been less familiar to a Galilean like Jesus. He proclaimed the coming Reign of God, and by following this path rather than preaching the violent overthrow of Rome and all unjust institutions associated with it, he spoke out against the religious hegemony of his day. He went so far as to announce that “God has not just spoken in the past but is speaking *now*,” and for our contemporary world this Jesus “frees religious experience from the fossilization of past traditions . . . and makes it accessible in the present.” Most of all, this “Jesus does not think of himself as the ‘last word of God,’ but points beyond himself to ‘One who will come.’”³¹

This portrait of Jesus Christ and how he understood himself as a preacher and teacher then and the living Christ now is radically different from the imperial christology that requires the kingship and *logos* motifs to justify its ideological base.

Christ as *Logos* or *Nous* (mind) of God discloses the divine mind and provides the plan and government of the established social cosmos. All is integrated into one vast hierarchy of being. Just as the *Logos* of God governs the cosmos, so the Christian Roman Emperor, together with the Christian Church, governs the political universe; masters govern slaves and men govern women. Women, slaves, and barbarians . . . are the *a-logoi*, the “mindless” ones, who are to be governed and defined by the representatives of divine *Logos*.³²

Those representatives are the leaders of the apostolic church, the very people whom the Christian tradition endows with authority because they give us a first-hand account of the life of the historical Jesus. Ruether grants the apostolic leaders authority, but it comes after “the mythology about Jesus as Messiah or divine *logos*, with its traditional masculine imagery, is stripped off.”³³ I want to take Ruether’s position one step further. With these myths in place, women’s experiences become questions of theological anthropology rather than a significant theological problem for *logos*-based doctrines of revelation. I agree with Ruether that the Jesus of the gospels discloses God’s vision of the Messiah as a servant, not a king. There is an end to domination and a liberation from hierarchy – this is wonderful, marvelous news!

This liberative, incarnational christology is helpful, but how can I express belief in Jesus' divinity if my acceptance of *logos* is highly qualified or even rejected? There is another biblical christology that my feminist theology of wonder incorporates into its system, that of Christ-Sophia. Citing the work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Jann Aldredge-Clanton writes,

Sophia christology pervades the early Christian missionary movement. The earliest theological interpretations of Jesus' life and death see Jesus as Sophia's messenger and later as Sophia herself. The earliest traditions connect Jesus with divine Sophia, the God of gracious goodness who accepts the poor, the outcast. Wisdom literature depicts Sophia as sister, wife, mother, beloved, and teacher. She is the leader on the way, the preacher in Israel, and the Creator God. She seeks all people and invites them to dinner. She offers life, rest, knowledge, and salvation to those who accept her. Sophia officiates in the sanctuary and sends both prophets and apostles. The early Christians attributed all these characteristics of Sophia to Jesus. The connection of Jesus with Sophia, who wills the wholeness of everyone, enabled the earliest Christian communities to become a discipleship of equals.³⁴

What I appreciate about this christology is its emphasis on relationship and the integrity of womanhood in the community of faith. Do you sense the same kind of possibility that I do in such an understanding of a dancing God who has come to live in our midst as Christ-Sophia and teaches us how to dance? Consider the words from a well-known folk hymn:

I danced in the morning
 when the world was begun,
And I danced in the moon
 and the stars and the sun,
And I came down from heaven
 and I danced on Earth,
At Bethlehem I had my birth.
Dance, then, wherever you may be,
"We are the Three of the dance," said s/he,
"And we'll lead you all wherever you may be,
 And we'll lead you all in the dance," said s/he.³⁵

The Wonder of the Spirit's Work

I love to dance, so it should not surprise you that I have found this idea of a dancing God to be of great importance and joy. I even have a t-shirt that reads, "To hell with war, let's dance instead." But dancing is not an end in and of itself. One of the gifts of nineteenth-century philosophy's impact on religion and theology is that a clearer connection was forged between theology and ethics. As a Mennonite, what I do with my beliefs is a vital part of my theological reflection. This turn to ethics is pneumatological. Fruitful living patterned after Christ-Sophia the Apple Tree or Tree of Life is how I like to think about ethics. But the seed is not sown and cultivated on its own; this is the work of the Spirit.

The tree of life my soul hath seen,
Laden with fruit, and always green;
The trees of nature fruitless be
Compared with Christ-Sophia the Apple Tree.³⁶

Christian theology and ethics relies on a sense of moral agency in order to be of any use to us or the communities we are part of. Moral agency is the power to embody active love for creation (includes self, other, and other-than-humans), the power to orient life around the long-term well-being of communities and the Earth, prioritizing the concerns of the most vulnerable.³⁷ In this way, we might think of moral agency as our invitation to wonder. How can our claiming and exercising of this power bring about a new sense of awe, depth, mystery, and possibility that leads to a revised world in which all things are made new?

Diane Ackerman wrote a poem that reads in part, "I swear I will not dishonor my soul with hatred, but offer myself humbly as a guardian of nature, as a healer of misery, as a messenger of wonder, as an architect of peace."³⁸ As a Guardian of Nature how will I cherish the natural order? As a Healer of Misery, how will I nurture people? As a Messenger of Wonder, how will I nonconform freely so that the signs of which I speak will not be corrupted? As an Architect of Peace, how will I learn from the world community so that the home we build has room for every being? These are the ethical questions that face us when our faith and belief is placed in a God who dances, who sows seeds, and performs wonders.

The Warning to Tend God's Wondrous Works

Let us remember that passivity in the face of these wonders is dangerous. In John's Revelation (12:1ff), his vision contains a scene where a gloriously robed woman is giving birth and a dragon waits to snatch up her baby and devour it. In the context of a theology of wonder, the dragon is a metaphor for all those things in our lives that have taken over or threaten to take over our moral agency. We need that agency not only to preserve our sanity, but because it is how we move our theologizing into action. To be able to imagine a world of peace, justice, and freedom, I must have access to those things in my own life and be able to model them in my faith community. This means I need to know how to ward off tree-killing axes, toxins in their various forms, violence-making wrecking balls, and voice-squelching crazymakers. In the case of that fire-breathing dragon, listen to words of the gloriously-robed woman herself:

When it was all over
they asked me for a charm
for banishing dragons.

I said
look them in the eye
and call them by name.
It makes them mad as hell,
but they can't abide
the knowing
of their name.³⁹

So, friends, learn the names of those dragons that want to crush the things that are coming to life and finding their voice in you. The sparks that have been sown in you like seed are signs of God's wondrous work in you. God's wonders reveal God's power, and God's power in us is our agency. Do not neglect the fruit of the Spirit that feeds your soul and your creativity.

This fruit doth make my soul to thrive.
It keeps my dying faith alive,
which makes my soul in haste to be
with Christ-Sophia the Apple Tree.⁴⁰

Imagining a world of peacefulness and freedom that is full of God's justice is our birthright in our new lives as Christian women who are called to be messengers of wonder. As we go forth, let us "sing a new song to the One who has said, 'Behold, I make all things new.'"

Notes

¹ Robert H. King, "Introduction: The Task of Theology" in Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King, eds., *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks*, Newly updated ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994), 1-27.

² John Macquarrie, "Systematic Theology," in *A New Handbook of Christian Theology*, ed. Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992).

³ King, "Introduction: The Task of Theology," 5-7.

⁴ C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1995), 84-94. Snyder also mentions the Anabaptists' penchant for reading the Bible's prophetic literature because "like virtually all Christians in the sixteenth century, [they] were convinced that they were living in the Last Days, and that Christ's return was imminent."

⁵ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁶ I have written two brief (unpublished) papers on the debate between J. Denny Weaver and C. Arnold Snyder in which I outline and make observations about their major points of disagreement. I am happy to share them with anyone interested in reading them.

⁷ King, 13-14.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

¹⁰ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology (with a New Introduction)* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

¹¹ S. Wagner, "môpef" in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 8; eds. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, Heinz-Josef Fabry; trans. Douglas W. Stott (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997), 178.

¹² J. Conrad, "pl', pele'" in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 8, 534 (emphasis mine).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 540-41.

¹⁴ Franz Annen in *The Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2; eds. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1981), 134-36. Horst Balz in *The Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 3; eds. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1981), 350.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Conrad, 542.

¹⁷ Dennis Quinn, *Iris Exiled: A Synoptic History of Wonder* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc., 2002), 121.

¹⁸ Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation” in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966).

¹⁹ Quinn, 3.

²⁰ Huub Oosterhuis, “Zomaar wyn dak wat hoofden,” trans. David Smith (Portland: OCP Publications, 1984) in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, managing ed. Rebecca Slough (Elgin, Newton, Scottsdale: Brethren Press, Faith & Life Press, Herald Press; 1992), #1.

²¹ Jan L. Richardson, *Night Visions: Searching the Shadows of Advent and Christmas* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1998), 64-65.

²² C. Norman Kraus, *God our Savior: Theology in a Christological Mode* (Scottsdale, Waterloo: Herald Press, 1991), 49.

²³ Anne M. Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 115.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 110-11.

²⁵ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and the Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1973), 1.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 270-71.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 271-72.

²⁹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983, 1993), 116-38.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 127-34. These include androgynous Christologies found among Gnostics (Clement of Alexandria), medieval mysticism (Julian of Norwich), and 19th-century Romanticism (Horace Bushnell); and spirit Christologies found in new prophetism, Montanism, martyr literature, the movement started by Joachim of Fiore, and the Shakers of New England.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 119-21, emphasis Ruether’s.

³² *Ibid.*, 125.

³³ *Ibid.*, 135-36.

³⁴ Jann Aldredge-Clanton, *In Search of the Christ-Sophia: An Inclusive Theology for Liberating Christians* (Mystic: Twenty-Third Publications, 1995), 21.

³⁵ My adaptation of Sydney Carter, “Lord of the Dance” (New York: Galliard Ltd., 1963) in *Sing and Rejoice: New Hymns for Congregations*, comp. and ed. Orlando Schmidt (Scottsdale, Kitchener: Herald Press, 1979), #67.

³⁶ Anonymous, “The Tree of Life” from *Divine Hymns* in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, managing ed. Rebecca Slough (Elgin, Newton, Scottsdale: Brethren Press, Faith & Life Press, Herald Press; 1992), #509.

³⁷ Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, *Healing a Broken World: Globalization and God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 35-36.

³⁸ Diane Ackerman, “Guardians,” quoted by Syracuse Cultural Workers in “2002-2003 Tools for Social Change” (Syracuse: SCW, 2002), 29.

³⁹ Jan L. Richardson, “Sun Woman Speaks” in *In Wisdom’s Path: Discovering the Sacred in Every Season* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2000), 13.

⁴⁰ Anonymous

A Theology of Welcome: The Hospitable Hidden Women of Acts 2, 4, and 6

Reta Halteman Finger

It was ironic that the very weekend I planned to spend working on this presentation I managed to be quite un-welcoming. I meet approximately once a month with two other women from my church – Brenda Hurst and Nancy Heisey. We had planned that they would come to my house Friday afternoon at 3, but I didn't write it on my calendar and forgot about it. So I was picking up my income tax report from my accountant when Brenda arrived, and she had to wait half an hour till I returned. All I had to serve her and Nancy was tea and two leftover chocolate chip cookies!

These are the times when one should draw solace from other examples of less-than-perfect hospitality. Fortunately, my philosophy of life is rooted not only in the Bible but in A.A. Milne's stories about Winnie the Pooh. I take comfort in the fact that I can hardly do worse than fat, lovable Pooh-bear and his reluctant friend Rabbit. Let's hear an excerpt from the chapter "In which Pooh goes visiting and gets into a tight place":

Winnie the Pooh was humming to himself and walking along, wondering what everybody else was doing, when suddenly he came to a large hole in a sandy bank.

"Aha!" said Pooh. "If I know anything about anything, that hole means Rabbit, and Rabbit means Company, and Company means Food and Listening to Me – Humming and suchlike." So he bent down, put his head into the hole, and called out:

"Hallo, Rabbit, isn't that you?"

"No," said Rabbit.

"But isn't that Rabbit's voice?"

"I don't think so," said Rabbit. "It isn't meant to be."

"Oh!" said Pooh. He took his head out of the hole, and had a think, and then he put it back, and said: "Well, could you very kindly tell me where Rabbit is?"

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“He has gone to see his friend Pooh Bear, who is a great friend of his.”

“But this IS me!” said Bear, very much surprised.

“What sort of me?”

“Pooh Bear.”

“Are you sure?”

“Quite, quite sure,” said Pooh.

“Oh, well, then, come in.”

So Pooh pushed and pushed and pushed his way through the hole, and at last he got in.

“You were quite right,” said Rabbit, looking him all over. “It is you. Glad to see you. Well . . . what about a mouthful of something?”

Pooh always liked a little something at eleven o’clock in the morning, and he was very glad to see Rabbit getting out the plates and mugs; and when Rabbit said, “Honey or condensed milk with your bread?” he was so excited that he said, “Both,” and then, so as not to seem greedy, he added, “But don’t bother about the bread, please.” And for a long time after that he said nothing . . . until at last, humming to himself in a rather sticky voice, he got up, shook Rabbit lovingly by the paw, and said that he must be going on.

Those of us who have been reading the right books know that Pooh gets stuck in Rabbit’s hole because he ate too much and thus has to stay there for a week without food until he gets thin enough to be pulled out. Well, at least Rabbit didn’t have to worry about planning menus and shopping for food!

I’m going to use some Pooh-logic here to get from my assigned theme to where I want to go. Pooh says, “If I know anything about anything, that hole means Rabbit, and Rabbit means Company, and Company means food and listening to me” If I know anything about anything, a “theology of welcome” means hospitality, and hospitality means homes (or tents!) and food, and food means women preparing and serving it! Tie all that in with “theology,” and it means that you have to go back to the Bible to figure out what it meant by hospitality, and then figure out from there what it can mean today.

There are two other reasons that I want to root whatever I say here in the Bible. First, the social practices of hospitality reflected there are much more similar to what takes place in developing countries than here in the West. The individualistic, technological culture of the West is far removed from our ancient texts. As we come to understand the social contexts from

which our scriptures came, we can better understand the social contexts of our sisters and brothers in the Two-Thirds world. Second, I believe that a theology of radical welcome is not something added on to the gospel of Jesus but is an integral part of it. For example, if you read any of the Gospels, but especially Luke, you will find one of the major characteristics of Jesus' life was that he ate meals with a lot of different kinds of people. Often that was what made him either loved or hated.

There are many examples of women and hospitality in the Bible, but I will just mention two in the New Testament and then focus on the women of Acts 2, 4, and 6. In Luke 10:38, Martha, apparently a disciple of Jesus and head of her household, "welcomes Jesus into her home." It would not have been appropriate for an unattached woman to invite a man into her house, but Martha must have felt comfortable enough with Jesus to do so, and even to complain to him about her sister's inhospitable behavior. Jesus obviously felt comfortable enough with her to tell her to chill out. Sometimes the most welcoming behavior is to forget making those extra chocolate chip cookies and just sit down and really listen to the visitor.

The second example is from Acts 16, where Lydia also appears to be head of her household. This is one assertive woman! First she gets the rest of her entire household (probably all her co-workers in dyeing and selling purple goods) to be baptized with her. Then, crossing gender, racial, and perhaps class boundaries, Lydia is portrayed in verse 15 as both persuasive and manipulative: "She urged us, saying, 'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.' And she prevailed upon us." Anyone who could prevail upon Paul to change his mind must have been forceful indeed!

But these examples are like the surface exploration of an archeological site – picking up potsherds that happen to stick out of the ground. What we need is a trench, digging down into one text to reconstruct a more complete picture of a particular theology of welcome, an entire believing community of women and men structured around hospitality through daily meals and worship together. For this, I chose Lukan summaries from Acts 2, Acts 4, and 6:1-6 [*printed in a handout distributed to participants in this workshop*].

Acts 2:41-47

⁴¹So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about 3000 persons were added. ⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute them to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread by households and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

The book of Acts is the second volume in Luke's two-volume work on the story of Jesus and the story of the church. In each case, Luke has edited his sources to show how the story of Jesus is paralleled in the story of the church, and vice versa. In the Gospel, we find Jesus being baptized by the Holy Spirit in chapter 3 and then announcing his political platform in chapter 4 by quoting Isaiah 61: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, sight to the blind, liberation to the captives" Then Jesus proceeds to put this agenda into action throughout the rest of the Gospel. One way he brings this good news is through the hospitality of meals. In almost every chapter Jesus is either going to, coming from, or at a meal, eating with people all up and down the social scale (except for the very rich). He's even called a glutton! The character of the kingdom Jesus is bringing about is seen at his meals.

In Acts we have both the parallel to and the fulfillment of Jesus' agenda. After he leaves the scene, his followers are also baptized by the Holy Spirit and proceed to put Jesus' agenda into action. Peter's impassioned speech in chapter 2 announces the beginning of the New Age; the Spirit is "bringing good news to the poor," to women, to slaves, to people from all over the known world. So after 3000 people repent and are baptized into the infant church, they proceed to organize themselves in a way that will bring Jesus' vision to reality. They share all their possessions with each other, as any had need, and they eat together by households every day. A second summary at the end of chapter 4 includes more details about this remarkable community of goods.

Now I can imagine some of you thinking, If this is what is demanded by a theology of welcome, I'm not ready to do that. Indeed, this kind of communal behavior has made Christians nervous over the centuries because it seems unrealistic by later standards. Most of us simply don't live that way and don't think we ought to. It sounds like communism! It challenges our God-given right to private property!

To get around these texts, four major interpretations have developed. Roman Catholics, for example, have believed that only monks and nuns in closed communities could live at such a high level of communal commitment. Conservative Protestants who believe Luke was writing accurate history assume that this lifestyle was attempted, but was impractical and thus very short-lived. It is not a model for others to imitate. A third view, articulated by John Calvin in the sixteenth century and by many others since then, stresses the spiritual unity experienced by these believers and downplays the material sharing. They had one mind and one spirit. This view overlooks the messy details of living. It's the kind of spirituality that never reaches to the nitty-gritty of life. Finally, there is redaction criticism, which is much more skeptical about Luke's historical accuracy. ("Redaction" means "editing.") Redaction scholars see Luke as an editor who shaped the story according to his own political and theological agenda. He wanted to idealize the earliest church to impress and inspire his readers, so he creates this community of goods and applies to the early Christians a Greek utopian phrase that says "Friends have all things in common." But it never really happened this way.

All these positions are held by various Christians today, but I do not accept any of them. I believe that if we can understand how normal first-century Mediterranean community life was structured, we can see how an organized community of believers who share their possessions makes sense. Instead of our capitalistic, materialistic, democratic, individualistic Western lifestyle today, what would life be like in a totalitarian, authoritarian, patriarchal, agricultural, subsistence culture? Not only would laws come from the top down, but the state itself – in this case, Rome – was a foreign oppressor, at least as bad as the Israeli occupation of the West Bank today. Those 90 percent of the people living at or below subsistence level were continually losing their land (the main source of wealth in an agrarian society) to the rich and powerful who preyed on them. The government's taxes and tax collectors

continually squeezed them dry – and the taxes only went to further oppress them, never for social services. Even the idea of democracy, human rights, equality of opportunity, or government social services to help the poor survive was beyond what anyone could have imagined.

Consequently, the only social security people had in that world was the extended family. Unless you were a social reject, you were part of a tight-knit clan. If you broke your leg and couldn't plant your barley, someone helped you out. If you had an especially fruitful harvest, your relatives expected you to help them out. You used each other's tools; you ate meals together; you raised each other's children. And so on. No one was allowed to get ahead of anyone else. This kind of kin-group sharing still exists in many parts of the world today to one degree or another, and is called "generalized reciprocity." It explains how people can survive in regions where there is 50 - 70 percent unemployment. Only in affluent Western cultures have we promoted individualism to such a degree that we can scarcely imagine such a communal lifestyle and worldview.

Imagine that you lived with all relatives in a block of houses surrounding an inner courtyard. You cook in the courtyard, you work together in some home industry. [*Instruction to participants: Stand up and talk with 2 or 3 people, name 5 things that you have in your possession now that you could share with the other people so not everyone would have to get one.*] The point is that it's much cheaper to live in a community of goods in a subsistence society. How vital it was to belong to a group. If you did not, it was social and economic suicide. Within these kin groups there was a clear division of labor by gender. There was women's work and men's work. Women generally handled food preparation and serving, took care of the goats, spun and wove wool and flax for clothing. Men did more outside work, although women also worked in the fields when needed. Men belonged to the public sphere of life; women in the private, within the home.

In similar societies, the same holds true today. I recently toured parts of Turkey. In the little villages we visited, it was the men who were consulted about what we wanted to see. Little boys flocked around us, but women and girls were usually absent. In fact, as we drove along we saw more women and children working in the fields while men sat in groups in cafes, apparently thinking and talking together about how to run their farms.

Yet in societies with large gender gaps, women often wield a lot of authority on their own turf. They may order their husbands around inside the house, or refuse to let their men inside if they haven't cleaned up well enough. An older woman may rule her three-generation household with stern discipline. And when marriages need to be arranged, it is the women who know the younger women well enough to propose who shall marry whom. The culture in which Jesus lived was organized in this way. Can you imagine, then, what would happen to people whom he called to be disciples and leave everything else and follow him? They would not have been able to survive – *unless* the Jesus-people organized their own kin-group. This is exactly what must have happened.

For instance, in Mark 10:28, Peter reminds Jesus that they had left everything to follow him. Jesus replies that “there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age, houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields . . . , and in the age to come, eternal life.” What Jesus meant is that they already had what sociologists call a “fictive kin-group,” a tightly-knit family united not by blood but by a common loyalty to their leader, Jesus. They already had what we can call the “kin-dom” of God.

Now let's take this fictive kin-group of Galilean peasants and follow them up to Jerusalem with Jesus. They did not know that their leader would be arrested, executed, and then resurrected from the dead, and that they would be staying there for quite a while longer. When Pentecost arrives and the Spirit descends and many hundreds of new people come to believe, they have to get organized big-time. Believers who live in Jerusalem must invite out-of-towners into their homes, perhaps add another room upstairs or into the courtyard. Those from other places must share the money they've brought for supplies and food for everyone. Tools must be shared; child care divided up. And so on, into a thousand details.

The sort of thing Luke talks about in Acts 2 and 4 makes perfect sense if you understand how ancient Mediterranean community life is structured. It also means that the communal meals must have been prepared and served by the women. The bread-breaking ritual, which we now call communion, would have been part of the meal, so the work of women was an integral part of the

spiritual life of the community. At the end of a day of labor, the daily meal became the central and unifying ritual of the Jesus-community. The work of women was literally holding the church together. The parable of the Great Dinner in Luke 14, to which the most marginalized people were invited, was being fulfilled, along with Deuteronomy 15:4, which promised that in the New Age “there will be no one in need among you.”

Acts 4:32-37; 5:1-11

Now let’s look at the specific examples Luke includes: Barnabas as a model of what to do, and Ananias and Sapphira as models of what not to do. I believe these people are included because they were among the very few who were wealthy enough to own land. Since Barnabas was a native of Cyprus, an island in the Mediterranean Sea, the field he owned was probably there. If it would have been near Jerusalem, it would have been retained and used for crops by the community.

The story of the punishment of Ananias and Sapphira for lying shocks us. But if we had lived in that culture, we would understand the necessity of complete truthfulness in these circumstances. Though it was permissible to lie to outsiders, lying was not permitted within the kin-group. Because of the high level of trust involved in a back-and-forth generalized reciprocity, one had to live a transparent life within the group. Sharing possessions demands absolute trust. So, when this couple lies, they betray the entire group. They have effectively made themselves outsiders, and their death is the sign that they are no longer part of the group. Acts 5:11 says that great fear seized the whole church. That was quite a lesson in understanding the high level of commitment demanded within this newly formed kin-group.

This sad story can also be useful for feminists. In the patriarchal society in which the Jerusalem community lived, the only reason Sapphira had to give her consent is that the property they were selling was part of her marriage agreement, called the *ketubah*. Ananias could not legally sell it without her consent. Sapphira submits to her husband and signs over the property. In so doing, she chooses patriarchy over loyalty to her fictive-kin-group of Jesus-believers. Even though this story is tragic, it can be useful for women in coercive marriages who are told to always submit to their husbands. If the gospel trumped marriage in that culture, surely it should in ours as well.

The next time women are mentioned in Acts, we find conflict.

Acts 5:42-6:6

⁴²And every day in the temple and at home they [the apostles] did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah. ^{6:1}Now during these days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily table service. ²And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. ³Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, ⁴while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word." ⁵What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

Now that we know something about the culture and social arrangements of first-century Palestine, can we reconstruct the story underneath this brief account? First, we need additional background information. This text has also been variously interpreted. Some conservative interpreters who believe the Lukan community of goods actually happened see this food fight as the beginning of its breakdown. Communal sharing doesn't work because some people just can't appreciate what they've been given. But redaction critics, who think that the community of goods never really happened, have a different theory, which also betrays their sexism. They think Luke is covering up the deep divisions among the Jerusalem community. A disagreement among women, of all things, simply would not have engaged the attention of the entire group and caused such reorganization. A poor-relief committee could have been appointed to take care of the problem. Luke uses the widows' complaint as a smoke screen to cover up the real issues that caused a split between Hebrews and Hellenists.

Yet in ancient literature, where men alone dominate the public sphere, women are never mentioned unless they are exceptional in some way. But, in this instance, women who prepared the daily communal meals eaten in the context of worship were at the heart of the ritual and economic life of the

community. In Acts 6 we have a situation in which something women did has so affected the Jesus-community that even the apostles are called in and the whole community is somehow restructured.

Can we come up with any other theories, given what we know about ancient community structures? Here are a few more clues.

1. Verse 42: the apostles' time is entirely taken up with teaching and preaching, both in the temple and at home. Therefore, women must be managing the households as they would naturally do in that culture.

2. The "Hebrews" refer to Jews who spoke Aramaic but probably also knew some Greek. This would include the women disciples who followed Jesus from Galilee and were present at his crucifixion and resurrection. The "Hellenists" were Jews who had returned to Jerusalem from the Diaspora and who spoke only Greek.

3. In the ancient world, since most people were married, "widow" could mean any woman unattached to a man. Widows could be poor or not-so-poor. But in this case, no widow would have been in need because Acts 4:34 said that none were in need.

4. In Acts 6:1, the Greek word usually translated "distribution" is actually "*diakonia*," which means service. In the context of food and meals, this term can only mean serving food at tables.

5. Acts 2:46 says that the community ate together by households every day in a sacred, or quasi-sacred, communal meal. Widows therefore did not live in their own little hovels and expect daily "meals on wheels."

6. In this honor/shame society with fairly rigid gender roles, honor for a woman means remaining sexually pure and doing women's work well. Doing things outside traditional gender roles would not be honorable for a woman.

[During this presentation, women organized themselves into groups of four or five to "do their own theology." How would they now interpret this text in light of the larger, first-century context of a community of goods? Many suggestions and insights were reported.]

I conclude that the real problem here was neither a deeper, male-oriented rift within the community nor a poor-relief issue of destitute widows being ignored at the food pantry or soup kitchen. Rather, it was Hellenist

women's honor that was being neglected. If women were doing their women's work of meal preparation and serving, a daily ritual that now held deep sacramental overtones and lay at the heart of their common life, Hebrew women may have taken those female roles that held the most honor. Especially if those Hebrew women included the Galilean disciples who had traveled with Jesus and provided for him and his larger "fictive-kin group." Such women may have been lighting the candles, presiding over the meals, and serving the food, leaving the less visible tasks, such as tedious food preparation and clean-up, to the Hellenist women. Add to these tensions the language barrier; the Aramaic-speaking women may have deliberately (or unconsciously) ignored or put down the Greek-only speakers.

The solution, arrived at through a typical Greco-Roman mixture of top-down and democratic processes, was that seven *men* should take over meal management. What can this mean, given defined gender roles in that society? I suggest it may be one of two options. First, that these men were all Hellenist shows a clear attempt at equality. If the honor of Hellenist women was neglected, their own Greek-speaking people should help to set things right and maintain equality. Further, perhaps the community reviewed Jesus' strong emphasis on role reversals and the greater serving the lesser (see Jesus' words on this in Luke 22:24-27, deliberately placed in the context of his last meal). Perhaps men were chosen to actually reverse roles and do women's work, which in that culture always had lesser status than men's work.

On the other hand, I am enough of a realist to suspect that men were chosen, not to actually *do* women's work but to *oversee* the communal meals. They became the representatives in the public sphere of communal life to manage what was going on in the private sphere and to make sure women received equal honor for women's work. We have no idea whether they actually did this work or not, since two of them, Stephen and Philip, immediately take up the tasks of teaching, preaching, and praying, which the Galilean apostles were reserving for themselves (cf. Acts 6:2-4 with 6:8-8:40).

What can we as believers draw from these texts for our current cultural situations? From this study, we can see that hospitality in the home blurs into church-community hospitality. We can't go back to the community of goods in this ancient agrarian society, but I'd like to see our churches do more to integrate the Table of the Lord in the upstairs sanctuary with the Sunday

potluck tables in the church basement, so that the work of women – mostly women, anyway – is seen as sacramental. I would like to see weekly soup suppers in churches to which anyone in the neighborhood is invited, especially the poor, and which also has a bread breaking ritual and a wine or juice sharing ritual as part of the meal.

But there are many other possibilities or combinations. We can use meals as a great opportunity both to welcome people in, feed the hungry, and celebrate the risen Christ at the same time. I'd like lots of people to say, "If I know anything about anything, that church means Friendly People, and Friendly People means Company, and Company means Food and Listening to me talking . . . and such like." Maybe they'll like it so much they'll get stuck in the doorway and never want to leave!

Winnie the Pooh excerpt from A.A. Milne, *Winnie-the-Pooh* [1926], reprint (New York: American Book - Stratford Press, 1961).

Finding Balance and Harmony in our Wandering

Iris de León-Hartshorn

When asked to present on the subject on the theology of wandering, I said, “Sure!”, not realizing the complexity that awaited me as I began to read and think through the idea of wandering. I also started connecting my own personal learnings of wandering and how they have helped shape my own theology and understanding of God.

My ancestors come from the great nation of Anahauc, a nation that included many groups and tribes, including the Toltec, Hopi, and others.¹ I learned a little Mexican history growing up and heard my grandmothers’ tales of our history. I also grew up with the Aztec calendar prominently hanging above our fireplace. A few years ago I was getting ready to attend a Mennonite Native American Assembly when I stumbled across an article written by Cecilio Orosco and Alfonso Rivas Salmon, who claimed they had discovered where the Mexica² people had migrated from and made connections between the Southwestern cultures, including the Mexica and all the Great Basin tribes.³

When I arrived in the summer of 2000 on the Hopi reservation in Arizona, I was immediately greeted by a sister who said, “I welcome you, cousin.” When she noticed the puzzled look on my face, she asked, “Aren’t you Mexican?” During my days on the reservation I started to make connections between the stories of my grandmothers and the stories I was hearing there. I decided when I got back I had to learn more of my history.

The history of my people – from a Mexican perspective – is hard to find in the United States. Therefore, many of my findings come from Mexican sources. The wandering of the Mexica began in 502 BCE. They left their home in Utah’s canyon lands, where the four waters meet – the Green, the upper Colorado, the San Juan, and the lower Colorado.⁴ The Mexica were forced to leave their homeland due to a drought, which they referred to as the “Rain of Fire.” Rivas Salmon and Orosco found numerical representations similar to the Aztec numbering system, in addition to pictographs represented

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in Mexico City during the reign of the Mexicas. The Mexicas wandered for 1800 years. I have reflected on what they were looking for and why in 1325 CE they settled in Tenochtitlán, now known as Mexico City. It was a swamp not conducive to livable land. Legend says that they settled there because their leader spotted an eagle sitting on top of a cactus devouring a serpent, and that the Creator told them to look for the eagle and serpent. My first thought was, What does that mean, and How did this connect with their understanding of the Creator? Anahuac theology describes a self-created Creator. There is only one Creator who is the balance of life, mother of the earth, and father of humanity. The serpent and eagle represent opposites, therefore bringing about balance.

Victor Villasenor speaks of how “balance” is sometimes said to be our sixth sense in Mexican folklore. Balance is what anchors us to Mother Earth and allows us to reach to Father Sky. In his memoir of his family, Villasenor says that a person’s intelligence was measured by her ability to live a balanced life rather than by book knowledge.⁵ We can also look at “balance” as setting things right. Jesus Christ came to set things right, to provide an avenue to bring all creation back into balance. Now, as we journey, whether we learn to use our sixth sense of balance or not, is up to us. We are the ones who eventually decide whether we will engage with the Creator or not.

The Mexicas did not see the land as swamp, something impossible to work, but they saw the possibilities the Creator had given them as a people. On this swamp they built three great causeways, a walled space measuring about 550 yards on each side. There was commerce, agriculture, art, music and poetry, which was the culmination of their 1800-year-journey. Two hundred years later, on August 16, 1521, the fall and capture by the Spaniards of Tenochtitlán, the capital, took place. Ninety-five percent of our people were killed within a period of seventy-five years.⁶ Almost all our records were destroyed. Christianity was used as a weapon to kill and torture people and to take resources, including human beings.

As I look at this wandering of the Mexica people and reflect on my own life and on biblical stories of wandering, I try to make sense of my ancestors’ history and my life today. So, as I begin to share my own learnings of wandering, I must recognize that my own journey has also been with the women that have gone before me. It is on the journey of my ancestors, my

grandmothers Carlota y Valentina, my great grandmothers Maria y Barbara, that I come to share cooperative learnings. I do not stand alone, I stand with these courageous and loving women who are a part of me.

The most well-known story of wandering in the Old Testament is that of the Israelites. But I want to reflect on Hagar's story (Genesis 16) and the times she was forced to wander, as a woman *with* child, alone the first time, and as a woman *with a* child the second time. She finds herself in a situation not of her own choosing, as neither a servant nor a handmaiden to Abraham. The force behind her wandering was not a natural disaster, but abuse of power over another human being. What happens when we are forced to wander? Does God meet us in the wandering, or are we left alone, deserted by all, even God?

The first time Hagar is forced to leave, it is due to Sara's jealousy of Hagar's pregnancy. Even though it was culturally appropriate for Sara to give Hagar to Abraham, did Sara not think what it must have been like for Hagar? Do we automatically accept what is acceptable socially or culturally? I have often wondered about Sara's own experience of God. What touched her spirit, her very being? Why do women make other, less powerful, women suffer? Sara used her power against Hagar. Abraham didn't ask her to leave. In fact he told Sara to do whatever she wanted with her. So if he didn't care what happened to Hagar and his unborn child, why did Sara use her in such a manner? The arguments I have heard claim that Sara was forced by societal pressures or the patriarchy of that day. Those excuses sound like things I often hear today between white women and women of color. Even if we view ourselves as victims, do we treat others with that same self-hate? Unfortunately for women of color, we often turn our self-hate on ourselves and our own communities. The first time Hagar leaves it's due to the "harsh" treatment by Sara. We really don't know what Sara did, but I must assume it was pretty bad to provoke a woman with child to run away in the desert.

The angel of the Lord intervened and found Hagar by a spring on her way to Shur. The angel told her that she must return to her mistress and that she was to conceive a son. God sent her back. Some of us may gasp and ask why God would do this. Others of us know why. How many times have we had to return to unstable situations because we knew it meant survival for the time being? God knew if Hagar went forward she would not make it to safety

in her present condition, so God sent her back. I've been in the deserts of Ur in Iraq and know even today it would very difficult for a person alone, much less a woman, to make it across the desert safely. As women we must be very careful not to judge other women who may have to return to an unstable situation. Not all women have the same options open to them.

Hagar goes back but, I am sure, not to a pleasant situation. I am sure that as women gathered in the Red Tent, servants were not treated as equals. In considering a place where women would bond, I have often wondered about the women servants. Were they allotted a small corner in the Tent? Were they allowed to converse as equals with the women in power? If Sara would not show respect to Hagar in her pregnancy, what makes us think things would be different in the Red Tent, an enclosed environment?

Maybe Hagar found comfort in God's promise in the beginning until Sara conceived a son, a development which put Hagar's own son second, like herself. One day as Sara saw Ishmael and Issac playing together, she decided Hagar and her son must leave. She wanted to make sure Ishmael would not inherit anything from her household. So for the second time Hagar was sent out with her son. This time Sara told Abraham to put Hagar and Ishmael out. This text seems to try to redeem Abraham and gives him permission from God to go ahead and send her away. I didn't read any text alluding that Sara had permission from God to send Hagar out the first time and God reassuring Sara that God would look out for Hagar. Here we may see how the writing and translation of this text protects the man's character and portrays Sara as an "unreasonable jealous woman." But it's also clear that Sara chose to stand with the powerful and to use that power to put Hagar and her young son out into the desert.

God's angel, hearing the cry of Ishmael, once again intervened. As the angel spoke to Hagar, she opened her eyes and saw a spring of water. The text goes on to say that God was with Ishmael as he grew up. Hagar went to Egypt, her homeland, to find him a wife (Genesis 21:21). What spiritual truths did Hagar gain from her experiences in the desert?

The Creator loves all creation and does not chose one person over another. That God personally intervened, not just once but twice, showed Hagar she was loved and was a person of value. Power abused is short-lived and corrupts those who continue to use it. If you look at Abraham's life, you

will see how he went on to use Sara by giving her to another man for his own gain and safety. He sought security through his use and abuse of power. Hagar and Ishmael waited upon God, and the text says that God was with Ishmael as he grew. Relationship with the Creator is about relying on God, and is not based on force or abuse of power.

Relationship with God cannot be forced, even though that is what western Christianity has done throughout history. The forcing of Christianity on people and groups has greatly affected my own spiritual wandering. In David Stannard's *American Holocaust*⁷ I saw for the first time sketches of my ancestors strung up in groups of thirteen, twelve representing the disciples and one representing Christ. While strung up, their stomachs were gutted and left for wild dogs. They were killed because they would not convert to Christianity, never mind that they didn't even understand the language.

What does that mean for my own journey? How do I make sense of a Creator who loves me and a religion that has been violently used? Where do I find balance, harmony with myself and the world around me? I wonder if similar questions were asked by Hagar. How could she reconcile a merciful and loving Creator by the actions of the Creator's chosen people?

As Hagar found the spring to rest next to, we should ask, What are the resting places for women today? Where can we find places of refuge? Where can we find places that allow us to speak truth to ourselves and to each other? Where can we find honest dialogue in helping us reconcile the schisms in our own lives, our histories, and our world? Can the symbol of the Red Tent be transformed to be inclusive for all women? In order to have our wandering bear fruit, we must find places to rest along the way. How can we create Red Tents for each other in the midst of our wandering? Using the framework of Mujerista theology⁸ I'd like to propose how we can make the symbol of the Red Tent inclusive and a place to find the balance and harmony we all desperately need in our lives.

First, we need to believe in ourselves. The Red Tent could serve as a place of nurture and building up of women who have had to struggle. As a woman of color I have had to return to abusive places for survival. Sometimes it has been the workplace, the classroom, and yes, even the church. At times discouraged, I could not see how God could work through me. Often I wanted the approval of white women instead of believing in myself. There have been

times I have waited for God to intervene, not seeing myself as someone God would work through for my own transformation. Both my grandmothers raised their children alone because their husbands died young. Both these women owned their own business. My grandmother Carlota owned a plant nursery. My other grandmother, Valentina, was a seamstress, sewing and selling curtains, slip covers, and bedspreads. These women believed they had what it took to make it through the Mexican Revolution and the depression as single parents. They had what we would call in Spanish “*ganas*.” They had strength and courage. They knew they were the ones who had to act.

Second, we must find a place where we can dialogue around issues of structural sin and how we all participate in it in various ways. We need to be able to talk together as women so that we can resist structural sin. We must stop sabotaging each other. In my experience white women often sabotage women of color by siding with white men in power. You can see the dynamic in the relationship between Hagar and Sara. Women of color often sabotage each other. We both miss opportunities for allowing God to work through us. We’d rather do the easy thing, take the path of least resistance. That path is deadly for all of us.

Often our society sets up the dynamics for women sabotaging each other. Within my own cultural myths we blame La Malinche⁹ for the downfall of the Aztec nation, instead of blaming the real perpetrators for unleashing an unwarranted war on an unsuspecting nation. Women are looked upon as being deceitful and liars, and sometimes we have played that role against each other. Where did we hear the stories, how do we find ourselves sometimes repeating them, and how can we live a different story? These are the things we need to talk about with each other.

Third, we must recognize the breaking in of God’s reign in our lives. Hagar had to be open to see the spring of water and the angel of the Lord. She could have dismissed the whole experience and continued going to Shur, her first time in the desert. In addition to being open, we must come to the Tent expecting to see God’s reign. When we get a glimpse of that reign, we need to rejoice, even in the midst of *la lucha* (the struggle). Being able to rejoice in the midst of the struggle allows us to see the possibilities of a new heaven and a new earth. I’m sure we have all had a glimpse of God’s reign, but what did we choose to do with it? Hagar listened, saw, and acted. She

was given a place in history she could not even comprehend. We don't have to understand everything about God, but we must be willing to see the possibilities of a new heaven and earth, to take on responsibility in ways that partners with God in co-creating a new heaven and earth. These are the possibilities that our mothers, grandmothers, great grandmothers and our ancestors yearned for, the balance of all of creation.

Fourth, we also must be willing to be transformed. Earlier I spoke of structural sin and how women sabotage each other. Our personal sin also holds us in bondage. It prevents us from seeing the reign of God, from seeing possibilities, and from becoming a new creation. We need to learn to be honest with ourselves by first seeing the sin in our own lives. We must refuse to allow others to name our lot in life. We need to envision our future, to give voice to our destinies and histories. In a recent lecture Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz spoke about transformation as changing our reality,¹⁰ emphasizing that we must first be able to imagine the possibilities. We must also be involved in changing our reality, at both a personal and structural level.

Fifth, in order to face ourselves we must believe we are daughters of the Creator. We are made in the image of the Creator. Unfortunately, we have often allowed outside forces to determine how we see ourselves. Women in the United States are pushed to be the image of "Superwoman." We are expected to model white male work values, where our professional life is just as important or more important than family. Some women find success in the image of "Superwoman," some women feel like failures, and others just refuse to participate.

Some of the most damaging ways we see ourselves have been through the images of the church. Growing up with images of a blonde-haired, blue-eyed Jesus, our subconscious image of God becomes white. At about age seven, growing up Roman Catholic, I asked my priest why God made people in different colors. His response was that God left some people in the oven too long. As a child, I translated that to mean God made a mistake with some of us. So I saw a white Jesus, a white priest, and a God who had made mistakes in creating certain people. It is no wonder as women we often find the hardest thing to do is love ourselves.

Our images must be re-imagined through the eyes of the Spirit of God, Sophia. She can help us create healthy images as daughters of the Creator

through stories of our ancestors, biblical stories of women, and the sharing of our own stories with each other. As daughters of the Creator we must be willing to listen to the Spirit. How can we do anything less? Loving ourselves translates into having the ability to love others.

Finally, we must believe the Red Tent can be a place of liberation. Can we see ourselves as daughters of the Creator? Can we see all humanity as daughters and sons of the Creator? Mujerista theology cannot talk about liberation for self without liberation for all of humanity.¹¹ The liberation must be for all women, men, and children. It must be both a personal and communal act. We must look for the safe places to explore the possibilities. Safe places must be created even in the midst of the most violent situations. There are places created by the Spirit of God and we must be open to see them.

In addition, we must also be willing to leave the comfort of the Tent to give life and vision to the possibilities for all humanity. There are times we may either choose or be forced out of our safe places in order to act in ways that help us resist both our personal and structural sin. Making contact with other people along the journey, finding soul mates who desire to take the risks in becoming a new creation themselves, and seeing the possibilities of a new heaven and earth are all part of the journey. It must be the liberating message of God that breaks us all out of our bondage.

Wanderings are spiritual. Finding the places of rest, places to meet others along the way, having faith to see the possibilities are all part of the spiritual journey. I believe my ancestors were right: Wandering is about finding balance and harmony with oneself and with all of creation. My prayer for everyone here today is that we take our wanderings seriously. Be open to hear God, see glimpses of God's reign in our lives and the lives of others, and be unafraid to step out and act on the possibilities God has for us. Being able to see the possibilities of God's reign is the beginning of our own transformation. *Dios les bendiga, hermanas.* God bless you, sisters.

Notes

¹ Antoon Leon Vollemaere, *The Search and Discovery of Aztlan, Colhuacan and Chicomoztoc*; <http://titan.glo.be/~kg000407/explorat.htm>; 02/03/2000

² Definition of “Mexica”: People from Mexico, includes Aztecs.

³ Cecilio Orozco, *In Search of Aztlan: Interview with Dr. Cecilio Orozco*; <http://www.insearchofaztlan.com/orozco.html>

⁴ Lared-Latina, *The Aztec Sun Stone* 1995-96; www.lared-latina.com/sunstone.html

⁵ Victor Villasenor, *Thirteen Senses: A Memoir* (Rayo/Harper Collins, 2002).

⁶ David E. Stannard, *American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World* (Oxford University Press, 1992), 85.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *En La Lucha: Elaborating a mujerista theology* (Fortress Press, 1993).

⁹ “History and literature have distorted and abused the story of the Aztec slave named Malinche, the interpreter for Cortez. . . . She has been blamed as the ultimate traitor to Mexico and she has also been used to symbolize the total negative essence of the Mexican woman.” Alma M. Garcia, ed., *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings* (Routledge, 1997), 116.

¹⁰ Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, Lecture on May 2, 2003 at Arch Street Quaker Meeting House, Philadelphia, PA.

¹¹ Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *Mujerista Theology* (Orbis Books, 1996).

The 30th Anniversary of the MCC Women's Concerns Committee

Luann Habegger Martin

The Environment that Gave Birth to the Committee

The resurgence of feminism in the 1960s took place during a decade of social protest – protest against racism and against the war in Vietnam. Women discovered that working for social justice could also mean advocating on their own behalf and on behalf of other women. While voting rights was the key issue of the first wave of feminism, reproductive rights, equal rights in the workplace, and an end to sex role stereotyping were primary issues for feminists in the '60s and '70s.

Several major events in the women's movement took place in 1972, the year that seeds were planted for the MCC Peace Section Task Force on Women in Church and Society. In 1972 the US Senate passed the Equal Rights Amendment and sent it to the States for ratification. Title IX banned sex discrimination in academic and athletic programs in schools. The US Supreme Court heard arguments for the legalization of abortion in the case of *Roe v. Wade*. The same year *Ms Magazine* began publication, and Helen Reddy sang her hit song, "I am woman, hear me roar . . . If I have to, I can do anything. I am strong, I am invincible, I am woman."

Helen Reddy's words did not express the experience of women in the Mennonite church who grew up with such songs as "Faith of Our Fathers" and "Rise Up, O Men of God." Why, they asked, did the church prevent them from using all of their gifts? They wanted liberation from restrictive language and images. Following the November 1972 MCC Peace Section Assembly in Chicago, interested individuals held a caucus and urged the Section to address discrimination against women as a justice issue.

In 1973 these concerns were brought to the attention of the Peace Section at its spring meeting in Ottawa. I reported on the Chicago caucus and showed a three-minute film that illustrated the impact of exclusive language.

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Dorothy Yoder Nyce, who was soon to be appointed to the Peace Section as the representative of the Women's Missionary and Service Commission, read her paper, "Male and Female He Created Them." Fern Umble and Lora Oyer, representatives of Mennonite Church and General Conference Mennonite Church women's groups, spoke of women's desires to contribute to the total life of the church. We rehearsed before the meeting and made a case for including women's concerns for peace within the Peace Section. The Section appointed a sub-committee Task Force of the four women members of the Section along with two Peace Section staff, Ted Koontz in Akron and me in the Washington office.

Accomplishments, First Two Years

The first objective was to communicate the issues and engage others in the dialogue. The buzz word in the women's liberation movement at that time was "consciousness-raising." We communicated through a newsletter, a Peace Section Assembly on The Interdependence of Men and Women, a packet of articles, a seminar for women, a position paper on women and work, a presentation at the MCC annual meeting, and letters to Mennonite college administrators, department heads, and church curriculum writers. *[Participants' registration packets contained a sheet listing Task Force activities during the first two years.]*

How the Task Force Made Things Happen

We began as a group of six, five women and one man, all of us middle class, white, and US citizens. Three were married. Four were in their twenties, two in their thirties. We knew little about each other, and we all lived in different states. Our first meeting was through a telephone conference call in May 1973. At that meeting we set our agenda for the year. As the name implies, we were task oriented. We didn't worry about a mission statement or by-laws. We had ideas and felt a sense of urgency. A core group within the Task Force was willing to devote considerable time to move the agenda forward. MCC provided a small budget, less than \$2,000, to support our activities.

Highlights of the First Years

Three highlights stand out. I was the editor of the first eight Task Force Reports, later named the *Women's Concerns Reports*. In the first issue I wrote that one of the goals of the newsletter was to provide a forum for sharing concerns, ideas, and resource materials. I tried to present facts, such as the low numbers of women in leadership positions in the church, and to give voice to women's personal experiences. I felt satisfaction in connecting women who might otherwise have felt marginalized in the Mennonite church. In rereading the first issues in preparation for this meeting, I came across a letter to the editor in the second issue. The writer said she read the first issue several times and hoped that other points of view would be expressed in the future. In particular, I think she did not appreciate my comments on male-dominated language in speaking of God.

A second highlight was the Seminar on the Family that I organized in Washington in May 1974. Several times a year the Washington Office of the Peace Section organized seminars on various topics for schools, MCCers, and church groups. One of my first assignments after I arrived as a volunteer at the Peace Section was to accompany the Peace and Social Concerns Committee from Region V, which may have been Franconia conference or Lancaster conference. You guessed it: everyone in the group was male and all of the speakers were men. Sixteen months later I was escorting fifty Mennonite women from across the country. Of the twelve speakers, ten were women.

The seminar included a discussion of reproductive rights, women and work, the rights of children, and other topics still relevant today. Speakers included a sociologist, the coordinator of the National Organization for Women's education task force, the vice chairperson of the National Women's Political Caucus, and Catholic theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether. Ruether spoke on "Sexism in Church and Society: Bad for Women and Children." She later went on to write about twenty books and edited at least another eight, one just off the press. At a luncheon meeting on Capitol Hill, Representative Martha Griffiths spoke to the group on "Government's Responsibility to the Family." Griffiths was a tireless advocate of the Equal Rights Amendment. Although the Amendment was three states short of the 38 needed for ratification, she saw women play a much greater role in politics by the time she died last

month at age 91. In 1973 Griffiths was one of 16 women in the House of Representatives. At that time there was one woman Senator. Today there are 70 women Representatives and 14 women Senators. The Washington seminar ended with two powerful Mennonite voices – Ruth Brunk Stoltzfus and Marian Franz – and a panel discussion called “Listening to Each Other.”

The third highlight was the privilege of representing the Task Force at the NGO Forum during the United Nations International Conference on Women in 1975. The conference was part of the observance of International Women’s Year. Nearly 6000 women and men from 81 countries gathered in Mexico City to discuss three themes: equality, development, and peace. Although organizers hoped the conference would focus on inequities in status, employment, and opportunity, many speakers from developing countries instead expressed anti-American feelings. They saw women from the United States first and foremost as Americans and all that this represents. Nationality and class proved, as often is the case, to be divisive factors at the meeting.

The Impact of the Task Force on my Life

Being on the Task Force was an empowering experience that heightened my awareness of gender, justice, and development issues. In 1976 I wrote a monograph for MCC on women and development, and went on to get a masters degree in international development. For the past fifteen years I have focused on infant and maternal health in developing countries. I am continually reminded of the injustices that prevent women from experiencing full and healthy lives. In the late sixties, an organization known as Another Mother for Peace coined the expression, “War is not healthy for children and other living things.” In March 1973 when the Task Force was created, the US dropped bombs on men, women, and children in Cambodia. In March 2003 the US dropped bombs on men, women, and children in Iraq. Equality, development, and peace: that was our task thirty years ago, and that is our task today.

And So It Began: On Birthing an Organization

Dorothy Yoder Nyce

To have by nature a point of view, to stick to it, to follow it where it leads, is the rarest of possessions, and lends value even to trifles.
– Virginia Woolf

No history includes all of the possible facts; it is always a selection from the available data. . . . We look for memory that connects us with our past . . . that helps us understand the present and that pushes to the future and to the changes that we have yet to see.
– Lois Barrett¹

Introduction

For as long as I have had a desk of my own, in a room of my own at home, the above wisdom from Virginia Woolf has been on the wall nearby. It has been there for me when bringing feminist thought to a biblical text, when seeing the interrelated nature of all justice issues, when in conflict with a church leader, when writing new paragraphs, when parenting, when relating with Hindu friends, and when pondering the MCC Task Force (TF), now called the Committee on Women’s Concerns (CWC).

Luann Habegger Martin begins her reflection article in this journal on the TF/CWC thirtieth anniversary – her probe of memory – with early 1970s societal influences. My article begins with details from the North American Mennonite environment. Readers will encounter shifts of both time and theme. Already in 1959, the *Gospel Herald* editor had advocated an expanded role for women in the church: “Let us set them free for the use of the talents which God has given them. There are many things that our women can and should do in addition to homemaking.” Yet, thirty years later, another *GH* editor reveals the ongoing controversy: “What (most determined feminists)

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properly object to is having Paul's words used to restrict women in the use of their gifts in the ministry of the church . . . if a congregation chooses not to ask for women to teach or preach, it should not be because of 1 Corinthians 14:34."²

For a course on women at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries in 1975, student John K. Hershberger examined writing about women that appeared in fifty *Gospel Herald* articles from 1966 to 1974 and several books by Mennonite women published between 1965 and 1971. The subject of women's role from those pens centered on themes of marriage and family. Articles on the doctrinal topic of headship, represented by a woman's devotional covering, lingered long in Mennonite Church (MC) circles. Headship set more limits on MC women in contrast to General Conference (GC) women, who were not reminded of being inferior to men through a veil for prayer. But socialization shaped both groups. Writer alarm, backlash, and ambiguity revealed the fear that new freedom for women – being more open and frank or being employed beyond the home – would weaken the home's foundation.

Ella May Miller's popular publication *I Am A Woman* (1967) held that "By nature a woman is passive and receptive psychologically."³ Her other Moody Press publication, *A Woman in Her Home*, extols homemaking as the most important career, as God's calling. Researcher Hershberger describes Miller's first book as a Mennonite "proleptic version of *Total Woman*," a resource that blessed female submission and subtle manipulation. Marabel Morgan's sex and materialism gimmicks came sprinkled with biblical quotes. A spate of letters followed the review of *Total Woman* by Margaret Loewen Reimer, who wrote, "In an era when women are struggling to be equal partners and marriage is ceasing to be a viable option for many people, this book can only do harm to those who are striving for happy, healthy marriages."⁴

In addition to her books, Miller's point of view found its way into Mennonite homes through her broadcast "Heart to Heart." In October 1975 Task Force members Loewen Reimer and Erna Klassen attended a Women and Religion Conference in Saskatoon. Fifteen pamphlets from Miller's "Heart to Heart" broadcast were distributed to delegates as examples of "church literature that perpetuates sexism." Knowing that the churchwomen who received the registration material represented a wide range of denominations, TF members discussed the dilemma of "how to support mothers and homemakers without appearing to force that choice."⁵ As part of their strategy

to raise consciousness in Mennonite circles, they corresponded with the Mennonite Media Ministries, to express concern for the image and interpretation that it seemed to endorse. They encouraged programming to “help women deal creatively with changes in role expectations.” A year later, Mennonite Media announced a shift “to a personal growth program for women, called *Your Time*,” with Margaret Voth as speaker.

John Hershberger describes 1970 as a “watershed” year. A year before, Beulah Kauffman had traced the changing function of the MC Women’s Missionary and Service Auxiliary. Mennonite women hoped to use the full range of their gifts throughout the church. Evelyn King Mumaw advocated singleness as a valued, productive lifestyle (*Woman Alone*, 1970). Lois Gunden Clemens’s Conrad Grebel Lectures, published as *Woman Liberated* in 1971, offered the clearest discussion of the issue in the MC to that date. Calling for equal opportunity for women, she, however, blessed sex role stereotypes via ‘complementarity.’ “Her lack of work with Biblical languages and history [for interpreting texts] [was] troublesome” for Hershberger. Had he researched General Conference attention to the subject, he might have encountered Dotty Janzen’s outline of scriptures in a speech given at the conference “Accent on Women,” held at the First Mennonite Church, Newton, Kansas on December 28, 1974.

Rebuttal to, and endorsement of, change followed. Articles about women in the church appeared in the *GH*, written by Anna Frey, Bob Baker, Arnold Roth, B. Charles Hostetter, David Helmuth, Dorothy Swartzentruber, Katie Funk Wiebe, Norman Shank, Winifred Beechy, Glendon Blosser, Anna Detweiler, Phyllis Pellman Good, John Drescher, and others.⁶ Then in April 1971, a thousand women heard Lois Gunden Clemens, Ruth Brunk Stoltzfus, and Helen Alderfer speak about Women’s Liberation at a Homebuilders’ meeting in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Ruth defined Women’s Liberation; Lois focused on churchwomen’s response to it; and Helen presented some anti-Women’s Liberation views that she had heard. Among varied points of view, speakers endorsed male headship. They also explained Betty Friedan’s views expressed in *The Feminine Mystique*. Helen noted that either men or women – those “who are afraid of strong relationships” – might oppose liberation.⁷

Ordination issues received attention. A March 1973 General Conference Progress Report on Ordination engaged the Believers Church concept of “priesthood of all believers.” Every Anabaptist was a minister. With categories

of clergy and laity downplayed, occasions transpire when “any Christian can minister to another . . . can be a mediator of mercy and grace.” Vinora Weaver Salzman did just that. She loved to preach and did so on occasion, over fifty years, often when her pastor-husband Earl needed to be away.⁸ When Emma Richards was ordained in 1972 in the MC Illinois Conference, officials stipulated that ordination was not open to all women. After a Kingdom Interest Group that focused women’s leadership, at the 1975 Mennonite Church Assembly in Eureka, Illinois, I wrote: “The important issues, I think, go beyond the mere frequency of positions held. When will we discuss: What changes in attitude result from genuine *co-operation*? Can *interdependence* be realized if women are still seen as dependent on men but not vice versa?”⁹

A strong heritage of headship for men and submission for women prevailed. A study (*Anabaptists Four Centuries Later*, 1975) of five Mennonite groups by sociologists J. Howard Kauffman and Leland Harder found that sixty-one percent of respondents favored no change in the ordination policy. Lois Barrett Janzen observed, “The problem is not official doctrine about ordination but that women simply are not seen as gifted.” David Schroeder tried to uphold change through better “use and understanding of Scripture.”¹⁰ Dutch Mennonite women had been formal ministers since early in the 1900s. And although Mennonite Ann Allebach was ordained in Pennsylvania’s Eastern District in 1911 (not to serve Mennonites, however), not until 1976 was another GC woman, Anne Neufeld Rupp, ordained. Elizabeth Yoder later notes, in a 1987 document,¹¹ that by 1986 thirty-nine women’s names appear in the GCMC Directory of Ordained Leaders.

A ‘feminist manifesto’ of sorts appeared in *The Mennonite*, March 20, 1973, through three articles: “Releasing Gifts,” “Mennonite Women: Three Portraits,” and “Personhood and the Real Woman.” A related bibliography, meditation, and editorial by assistant editor Lois Barrett Janzen followed. Before long, another spate of reader letters pro and con appeared. That fall the seminary in Elkhart offered a course titled “Women in Church and Society.” In October a General Conference “Consultation on the Role of Women in the Church Today” took place at AMBS. Positive results of that event were naming Herta Funk to a half-time staff position for Women’s Concerns and Adult Education by October 1974, and naming a woman to each of the GC major Commissions by 1975.

Peace Section Meeting in Ottawa

Within such a milieu, need we be surprised that four women approached the MCC Peace Section in February 1973 with a proposal? Together, Ferne Umble (the MC Women's Missionary and Service Commission representative to PS), Lora Oyer (who represented the GC Women in Mission), Luann Habegger (Martin), MCC PS staffer in Washington, and I (incoming WMSC rep) convinced Peace Section members that women's experience was a justice issue, that it was worthy as ongoing agenda for MCC. Several quotes from the scripture-focused paper "Male and Female He Created Them" that I presented to PS members provide flavor.

- . . . Continuing to misinterpret and over-emphasize the creation account in Genesis 2 and intentionally ignoring the aspect of equal male/female responsibility for being the image of God as explicitly stated in Genesis 1 deprive all of humanity from developing into the whole people that God intends us to be.
- . . . We need to look between the layers of editorializing and the cultural mindset of male editors, translators, and leaders through the centuries to discover women's roles described in scripture. Elsie Thomas Culver maintains that "with the possible exception of the Persians, the Hebrews developed what may have been the most pervasively male cult in the ancient world. . . ."
- The degradation of women followed the same downward spiraling pattern and for the same reason: man's unwillingness to be dependent (on God or woman) and to share equally the responsibility for dominion (intended as 'responsible care'), under God. Domination (as it developed) describes fallenness, for the one dominating and the one willing to be dominated. . . .
- Quoting Madeleine Barot: 'In Christ we are liberated from our temptations to selfishness, exploitation, and domination and are led to possibilities ever renewed of communion with others, which is the creative aim of God.'¹²

Following my presentation to the Peace Section, Luann said, "In this 'Decade of Women' (the 1970s), women are being freed with a new self-respect and are calling on the church to allow us to develop and use our full potential."

She reported to Peace Section members on the women's caucus that had followed the 1972 MCC PS Assembly in Chicago. There, women had asked, "How could a church concerned about issues of peace and justice deny women full participation because of their gender?" There, concerns had surfaced about male-oriented God language, limited vocational choices for articulate women in church work, the need for feminist theologians in Mennonite circles, and whether MCC might invite women leaders from other countries to address issues that concern them about North America.

Ferne Umble was also persuasive. "Women's peace interests are the same as men's, their concern is the liberation of all groups." Lora and Ferne spoke on behalf of their women's groups. Churchwomen experienced injustice, even though some men or women might deny that fact. Less experienced as leaders, women desired to be mentored, but with freedom to lead through patterns different from those of most men. Ferne concluded by inviting PS members to share the concerns raised within their spheres of influence, to see how this agenda fits within PS Guiding Principles, to assist with related publishing projects, and to invite a woman to give major input at the next Peace Assembly.

The following actions were passed:

Moved that MCC Peace Section express its appreciation to the women members and participants in this session. We are grateful that they have sensitized the male members to faulty use of language, distorted values, inadequate biblical interpretation, and discrimination against women in church and societal structures.

The Peace Section accepts the challenge to place women's interests on its continuing agenda and supports bringing these concerns to the attention of the church via a variety of forms, and offers its resources for such. The Peace Section appoints a subcommittee of the women members of the Section along with Luann Habegger and Ted Koontz as staff persons to pursue the suggested goals. *Motion: John Lapp, Second: Lee Roy Berry. Carried.*¹³

Initial Task Force Activities

Two months later the subcommittee ‘met’ by conference telephone call. We abbreviated the organization name – MCC Peace Section Task Force on Women in Church and Society – to the Task Force, or MCC Task Force. Members agreed to share roles and assignments, value diversity, be visionary, and serve as a catalyst. The agenda reflects goals: (1) Networking: “We feel a great deal of support for each other”; “We need Canadian members.” (2) Information exchange: upcoming GC Consultation on Women; journals for each to read; (3) Projects and events: newsletter and book of essays – “The TF is one way for us to get women’s concerns into print”; the next Peace Section Assembly, a seminar in Washington, DC; (4) Strategy: filling more church positions with qualified women.

As I reflect on the early Task Force years, I am amazed at all that we achieved with so little funding, so little voice in church-wide structures, so little exposure to being political – all without computers. To network meant that we looked to each other as women, for Wisdom. (Ted Koontz, who served the TF from his Akron staff desk, is to be commended for working so effectively with a group of women. He was indeed “sympathetic to the cause.” After Ted, all other MCC staff people for the TF have been women. Also, the TF budget, never large, started at \$1,500 for a year; by Dec. 1977 it was \$1,800.) Women found a voice; once found, it could not be silenced again. Getting ideas into print enabled a growing sense of consciousness raising, of bonding on issues, and of shaping liberation through Mennonite values, women’s experience, and broad principles of justice.

Resistance surfaced. An active MC Peace Section member questioned me as to whether women’s issues or gender was actually a peace issue. The TF needed to establish legitimacy. We needed to discover how feminism would shape peace efforts. Carol Gilligan, a secular writer, identified “stoppers” (ideas meant to silence) that we came to recognize. For example, one person suggested that “Luann and Dorothy could be replaced with people less committed to the agenda.” A seminary faculty member said, “AMBS should not take an advocacy role for women. Women are accepted by virtue of their competence, but they may need to be ‘super-competent.’ [AMBS] needs to provide more counseling for women students to take a gentle approach followed by questions.”¹⁴

In her organized fashion, Luann chaired our first TF meeting ‘in person’ – late October of 1973. Lois Keeney kept detailed minutes.

- Ruth C. Stoltzfus (Jost), another PS member, presented a list of topic areas for an essay book, to be written primarily by Mennonite women. We considered gathering a packet of reprinted articles too.
- TF membership depended on PS membership. Since Mennonite Brethren women had no overall structure through which to make such an appointment, and “TF prodding had failed to get priority or passage through MB male organizational channels, we chose to nominate Katie Funk Wiebe as a Peace Section member-at-large. Steps to bring on three Canadians to the TF by 1975 were begun.
- Recommendations to be presented to the 1974 PS meeting included projects and events, and authorization for members to consult with conference offices, to collect a library of useful resources.
- A TF review was scheduled for presentation at the 1975 PS meeting.

Members updated each other on assignments. Luann agreed to continue as editor of the “Report” / Newsletter; all suggested themes or writers. Luann’s vision for a seminar on the family, to be held the following May in Washington, DC, looked promising for fifty Mennonite women. It would explore family trends and pressures, assets or limits through schools, sexism, children’s rights, the welfare system, and employment. With Luann and Marian Claassen Franz familiar with Capitol Hill, contacts were simplified. With qualified speakers invited such as Congresswoman Martha Griffiths (Michigan), sponsor of the Equal Rights Amendment, Audrey Colom, with the Children’s Defense Fund, and noted theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether, participants could expect a flurry of information and challenge to their ideas.

Ted and I outlined the Peace Section Assembly scheduled for two weeks later (November 9-10) at Camp Friedenswald, not far from Elkhart. With a focus on the “Interdependence of Men and Women,” we anticipated healthy exchange. Nearly fifty people accepted speaking assignments, three-fourths of them women. Delighted to have over two hundred attend, the TF knew that the varied formats for input and conversation would highlight the

socialization process that shapes human relationships. Total costs per person would be between \$17 and \$20.

Notes from the Assembly reflect diverse themes and speakers:

- “. . . separation of people lies at the root of other problems.” (John A. Lapp)
- “Luann explored women’s actions and Peace Activities in 1840, at an anti-slavery convention.”
- “The constitution gave equality to women for the first time in Japan in 1945.” (Alice Ruth Ramseyer)
- “In Botswana, women work very hard. They are in charge of agricultural work in addition to housework. Men have control of the cattle and, therefore, of the wealth.” (Anna Juhnke)
- “A most significant aspect in our struggle with relationships is our willingness to never give up in discouragement because of barriers.” (Lora Oyer)
- “Early Anabaptist equality occurred through voluntary baptism, confession of faith, discipleship, and death. In their writings, the phrase ‘brothers and sisters’ was often used.” (Richard Friesen)
- “In order for both husband and wife to be employed, some sacrifices are needed.” (Alta Hertzler)
- “Of all people on welfare, two-thirds are women and children.” (Dorothy Ann Friesen)
- “If we cannot deal justly with the one woman in prison, there is little hope for thirty men prisoners, the present ratio.” (Lois Rensberger)

The TF was “a working group, not an advisory board.” Correspondence between meetings always included personal items alongside assignment updates. Details might refer to plans for marriage, birth of a first child, gardening results, or dealing with a child’s case of chicken pox. With two meetings scheduled per year, each person was expected to send a mid-meeting report to the others – of progress on tasks being done (or insight from meetings attended and journals read). Luann designated three journals for each member to explore: feminist, church, or general women’s types.

Other Christians, whether Methodist, Roman Catholic, or Church of Christ, produced materials useful for us. We brought Mennonite insight to our

learning from them. With churchwomen like Letty Russell, Alice Hageman, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Anne McGrew Bennett, and Carter Heyward, we were never without mentors. I knew that fact also with seminary courses: I researched all of the women mentioned in Deuteronomy through 2 Kings, all references to goddess figures in Jeremiah, specific medieval women, Anabaptist women's accounts in the *Martyrs Mirror*, and many nineteenth-century US ordained women. Hearing Mary Daly, Suzanne Haïtt, and Phyllis Tribble lecture provided wisdom for more than TF correspondence.

By the March 1974 PS meeting, plans for an essay book had been set aside. Instead, I had gathered and edited thirty articles for a Task Force packet titled "Persons Becoming." The first printing of 500 copies, ready in April, would eventually lead to 1800 in print. Each sold for \$1.50. Articles, written mostly by Mennonites, were organized under four themes: The Bible and Women, The Church and Women, Changing Relationships, and Third World Women. Gayle Gerber Koontz introduced Christian Feminists as those who call for liberation from destructive sex roles; desire freedom to use gifts in the church; challenge structures that alienate or oppress; seek language, image, and thought patterns that validate women's experience; and balance healthy self-love with an ethic of service.¹⁵

Women and Work

Margaret Loewen Reimer included a paragraph about a study on Women and Work in her review of Task Force endeavor up to mid-1976.¹⁶ That study "led to the formation of an Advisory Group appointed by MCC's executive committee to study recruitment, assignment and services of women in MCC." Asked to serve on this Advisory Group, I also addressed the annual meeting of MCC in Winnipeg in January 1975 on "Women in Church Vocations, Institutions, and Structures." Larry Kehler observed, "If Canadians feel under-represented (one-fourth of the MCC Board members) and unheard, women have good reason to feel even more so."¹⁷ My intent was not to exaggerate women's involvement in ancient scripture or current MCC tasks but "to take them out of hiding":

. . . We sanction the absence of a group by overlooking or intentionally ignoring their presence. Or we lament, "but there is no one qualified," and then proceed to thwart or deprive women

of those options that are available to men, who ‘do qualify.’ We glorify the motherhood of Hannah, Ruth, and Mary, instilling guilt for women who choose from among career alternatives, and perpetuate woman’s vicarious ‘nature’ – achieving satisfaction or identity through another [husband].

We give names to the less desirable – Jezebel, Bathsheba, Delilah, Athaliah – and keep anonymous the wise woman of Tekoa, the wealthy Shunamite woman, and the maid or woman in very human anecdotes of II Kings. . . . We organize Paul-Timothy, Teacher-Disciple programs, but cannot identify or bring ourselves to the teamwork of Paul-Priscilla or to Apollos’ learning from Priscilla and Aquila.

Would not to fill more advanced staff positions with women change the image of such work, thereby crediting competence in either sex? Not until we portray such mutual task/employment circumstances do we grasp the power of Jesus’ redemption for the division of labor meted out at the Fall. . . . Although we have all grown up in societies that expect women to sacrifice their personhood so that men can become, that expect men to sacrifice their nurturing nature to accentuate this quality in women, by now we should recognize these divisions as characteristic of fallenness. . . . What is important is that we together plan for the future, noting candidly what problems may arise. . . .¹⁸

After this speech, “the Committee moved to encourage MCC to review employment practices and to provide increasing opportunities for women in leadership.” Two of its thirty-three members were then women – Helen Alderfer and Marie Wiens. Except for the Peace Section, no women in 1975 were appointed to MCC-related boards.¹⁹ African American Lee Roy Berry reminded the Committee that “white women are also part of the privileged class,” and Siegfried Bartel cautioned MCC to “remain sensitive to congregations who are not ready to deal with the issue.”²⁰

An Advisory Group was formed to assess MCC’s employment practices. It consisted of Joyce Bratton, Sarah Ann Eby, Marian Preheim, Roy Sider, Anne Warkentin, and me. The Group “hope[d] to hear about persons’

past experiences with MCC as an employer, do research on groups comparable to MCC, examine policy statements, and formulate ideas on what should happen in the future.”²¹ (Here I rely on TF minutes and an MCC News Service piece.) After a half-year, Sarah Ann expressed concern that the Group’s twelve recommendations were too general. We chose to present questionnaire results to the Executive Committee but continued to work with specifics. The survey – aimed to discover areas in which MCC could “improve in relating to and using the skills of women volunteers” – provided responses from 160 people serving in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Europe, and North America.

Counsel emerged: Women needed to be more involved in agricultural development, especially where indigenous women do the majority of crop raising. Respondents requested more involvement of women in leadership positions within MCC, at Akron and in global settings. “Skills and abilities should be the criteria rather than sex.” Workers desired more pastoral care. Married couples desired more structured involvement for wives – about one-third of MCC personnel. Their contribution, as with program planning, deserved to be credited. Orientation sessions at Akron could better assist children. Sessions should also aid single volunteers more with adjustments, and better prepare married couples for marriage patterns within each host country.

Advocacy through Correspondence

Communication issues shape all organizations. Examples of Task Force correspondence follow. Editor Harold Jantz wrote in the *Mennonite Brethren Herald*: “The question of male-female relationships has loomed increasingly larger within North American Mennonite circles since the quiet days of the mid-1960s, when during the Mennonite World Conference, the Canadians and Americans were astounded by the militancy of the Dutch Mennonite women.”²² He then culled from a TF “Report” several axioms formulated at a conference on interdependence held at Goshen College the year before. He was troubled by the axioms because of a lack of role distinctions (what he called “sameness”) for women and men and because they “reject the notion of a biblical model for the family.” His language and judgements misrepresented the content, a not uncommon feature of discussions toward advocacy for women.

I drafted a response that the Task Force endorsed. We wished he had presented the scope of axioms reported. We found the proximity of his editorial to John Drescher's reflection on Sweden's assault on marriage to be less than helpful. We stated the TF's wish that all Christian relationships (including marriage) reflect interdependence and Christ's self-giving; that marriage and mothering, while indeed valid, are one of several options available; that each person deserves to develop the full range of being human (not carelessly labeled "sameness").

A Task Force letter went to Mennonite College Deans and heads of sociology and religion departments late in 1974. Aware that secular studies were available, we encouraged studies from Christian students regarding women in church and society. Linda Falk Suter identified three Women's Studies courses and special lectures about women available to students at Bluffton College. To share such data through the "Report" reflected the Task Force's conduit role. Later, Katie Funk Wiebe requested information from women faculty at sixteen Mennonite colleges about courses, student research papers, library holdings, and lecturers. We also hoped to promote a resource pool of alumni with seminary or other advanced degrees, so that more women could be named to church or faculty positions. In May 1978, the TF printed a Resource Listing of ninety capable women ready to lead. Five years later, a listing of two hundred women appeared.

Ted's letter encouraged AMBS faculty to assist women with pastoral jobs. Erland Waltner replied (May 1976): "We serve as a channel of information . . . but have not adopted an aggressive placement or advocacy role." He reported that AMBS had appointed a campus task force on the role of women (Bertha Harder, convener), offered two related courses (Women in Church and Society, and "Man: Male and Female" – Greek exegesis taught by Gertrude Roten and Jake Enz), and provided other settings to discuss the issues. I recalled a comment from the wife of a young seminarian at his ordination the year before, "Now, he will increase and I must decrease." That same seminarian's comment to me after seeing my one-act play about Jesus and the woman at the well was, "Your competence threatens me." Though honest, his adjustment was real. Not all seminary students were ready to share strengths.

Although no letters followed from people involved with Foundation Series Curriculum materials, Herta Funk did counsel some writers regarding

stereotypes. The TF had alerted writers to develop materials, for children or adults, “that accentuate the wholeness (or partnership) of being human,” that avoid limits and sex stereotypes – whether for people or God. It encouraged stories about Huldah, Hebrew women at worship or as “heads of fathers’ houses,” Jesus’ radical relating with women, and Phoebe’s early church leadership – along with traditional stories.

An unexpected contact could prompt an exchange. During a graduate school class, Luann heard a critique from an incident with Mennonite Disaster Service. The speaker, a staff member of the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs, had traveled in Guatemala, where she met some Mennonites rebuilding homes after an earthquake. Noting that only men were building, she had asked why no women were involved. “Women don’t build houses,” was the Mennonite’s reply. “Women are unskilled, and we don’t have time to train them.” All of which prompted Luann to write to Nelson Hostetter to ask how MDS was “attempting to integrate women into its program and to eliminate sex role stereotypes.”²³

Appreciative letters also expressed Task Force views. After the 1978 Mennonite World Conference in Wichita, people wrote to Virginia Mininger regarding her major contribution with music planning. “The special music was great. Singing together was an exciting time. We are certain that it was very demanding for you and Mary [Oyer], but you performed your tasks with exceptional spirit and expertise.”

Global Connections

Initial Task Force agenda gave serious attention to global women’s experience, consistent with MCC’s long history. With only \$100 from the TF budget, Luann ‘represented’ us at the NGO forum of the UN International Conference on Women in Mexico City in July 1975. Herta Funk of the General Conference women’s desk also joined the six thousand people from eighty countries who attended this International Women’s Year event. Although the Tribune format involved many panel presentations with audience participation, 190 interest groups (caucuses) also occurred.

Within a political tone, Tribune agenda on themes of equality, development and peace progressed. Ukrainian women from the US held a hunger strike on behalf of Ukrainian women imprisoned in the USSR. Marxist

feminists dispersed a meeting on nuclear disarmament by refusing to give the microphone to the named panelists. “Anti-American feelings ran deep, particularly from the Latin Quarters.” They faulted imperialism. They perceived the US women’s movement as anti-male or anti-family. Because the Tribune had no official voice, the UN faced 900 amendments submitted by official delegations.

Luann valued and critiqued the conference. It failed to examine the impact of religion on attitudes and practices toward women. “If our attitude toward theology is not one of mutual sharing and discovery, our Third World sisters will view us as dogmatic and in some ways imperialistic.”²⁴ She regretted the dominant role US women had had in planning the Tribune; she wished for a broader spectrum of opinion to be voiced toward US policies. Yet, “those of us who went, realizing that we have a responsibility to find out what unites or divides us from other women, were stimulated. . . . It was very valuable for me to get into closer touch with the concrete situation of thousands throughout the world. No one could leave the Tribune without recognizing that the cause of the women’s movement is just, and that the strength of the movement is growing.”²⁵

Luann returned inspired to complete a monograph on Women and Development and to propose an MCC project on so-called Third World women. To understand why North American women are called oppressors, she wished for MCC resources to “sensitize Mennonites to the status of women throughout the world.” She envisioned a short-term staff person with overseas experience to plan seminars, develop a study guide, explore related media resources, and shape MCC programming – domestic and overseas.

Conversation reshaped Luann’s proposal. The Task Force explored plans for the 1978 Mennonite World Conference, to be held in Wichita.²⁶ Paul Kraybill, executive secretary of MWC, cautioned against our hope to bring women to the conference from the Third World: “Overseas churches choose their own representatives, and usually these are church officials. Further, a woman traveling alone with men is not considered in the best of taste.”²⁷ Gladys Goering and Beulah Kauffman, executive leaders of the GC Women in Mission and MC Women’s Missionary and Service Commission, along with Luann from the TF and Herta from her GC desk, pursued correspondence with Kraybill.

Kraybill addressed numerous issues. Conference ‘delegates’ would be only those officially appointed by groups represented on the General Council (“the only decision-making body in MWC”). MWC had established a travel fund for such delegates, perhaps fifty of the ninety-five being from Third World countries. But the Council would not mandate whether to choose women. Kraybill counseled: Expect to interact with women coming from Europe, with minority North American people, with spouses of trainees and students already in the US and Canada, and with a few Third World women who will come at their own expense. Then, he added, a place to begin might be “to offer a travel subsidy to spouses of Third World delegates.” However, such spouses might not “function in one of the five translation languages, or their background and experience may be too limited to enable significant participation.” Implications seemed to suggest that marriage qualifies a woman, rather than her skills, and male delegates can overcome obstacles. Luann expressed Task Force preference for women guests “with a keen interest in the Conference, those who could contribute to the dialogue, here and at home,” not always true of leader spouses.²⁸ The hope was also to integrate women into all program aspects.

With hospitality a strong concept in Third World countries, Kraybill preferred that North Americans engage in escorting foreign guests while in Wichita rather than plan to share a study conference. He welcomed names of potential women speakers or discussion group leaders; seventy names were shared! Herta, Gladys Goering (WM), and Beulah Kauffman (WMSC) joined Luann in making plans for a hospitality center for women at MWC. They hoped that Mennonite Brethren and Brethren in Christ leaders would join them as a committee to plan – for staffing, receptions, discussions, and displays. They needed to raise \$10,000 for a travel fund for sixteen foreign women, which Kraybill offered to match from MWC funds.

Luann clarified the rationale for a hospitality center: To get acquainted and establish cross-cultural friendships; to learn of women’s involvement in Mennonite churches overseas; to assist the visitors with their questions. Kraybill’s response countered. The MWC Program Planning Committee (and Rosemary Wyse, staff member in charge of international hospitality) raised serious concern “regarding the planning for a women’s activities committee. . . . [they were] troubled by the prospect of women’s activities, or even a women’s hospitality

center which sets apart one group against another . . . which counters integration . . . perpetuates the segregation of women and men. . . . A fellowship meal for women might be a possibility. . . . In summary, I am concerned that women's activities and planning do not become a block of interest"²⁹

The women replied, confused and frustrated. Never had the women's hospitality center been perceived as a place to "set apart one group against another" or to interfere with the integrity of scheduled activities. Via Luann's letter, they next explored the program time "allotted for special interests." Perhaps an interest group on women and the church, followed by a meal, could be arranged. As minorities or people from the same region might gather to support each other or to reflect on their relationship to the larger group, authentic harmony and integration might evolve.³⁰

Kraybill replied with appreciation for Luann's candor. In his view an interest group for women would "be even less desirable than some other suggestions." Already in 1975 the Presidium (the former name for General Council) stated that it "does not favor separating women from the other interest groups." Working/interest groups are to "represent a mix of persons. . . . We wish to make it possible for leadership persons in various areas such as peace, missions, etc. to get together for specific planning . . . for functional, administrative sessions. . . . I have a serious problem if women's interest groups compete with such meetings. . . . both in terms of limited facilities and in terms of the image that would be created, we raise serious question regarding the justification for a women's hospitality center." His summary comments promised to keep the women informed, to welcome their suggestions for hospitality (for women and men, not women alone), to encourage dialogue other than during scheduled activities, and to understand that a women's committee would not be part of conference structure.³¹

Gladys summarized her and Herta's meeting in Kansas with Kraybill and Wyse: No women's hospitality room. No separate women's committee for anything. Hospitality will include clusters of eight or so chairs in the exhibition hall. A forum or panel of African women would be okay for the "special interest" time slot. Standing Committees would not expect to arrange for food or facilities if women met for a luncheon. Women's organizations should not place women (unless with men) in church contacts following the MWC. Gladys believed that greater awareness of women's perspectives

had engaged MWC pre-planning more than ever before. “Let’s accent the positive though and soft pedal the failures of some of our hopes.”³²

Efforts continued and the goal was reached for sixteen international women to travel to Wichita. Fourteen of the guests spoke English, one each French and German; all were greeted on arrival.³³ By then, Luann was on a foreign assignment. A women’s Task Force for World Conference – Herta Funk, Esther Hess, Joan Wiebe, Thelma Kauffman, Dinah Nachtigall, and Gladys Goering – did plan two events. A Wednesday evening buffet meal meeting was held at the Holiday Inn, with seating for 425 (about one-fourth from overseas), with a hostess for each table. On Thursday noon less than a hundred women met informally for discussion over a bag lunch. A souvenir 8 by 10 reproduction of “Wheatscape” created by Ethel Abrahams was given to each attendee at the meals. Gladys Goering reflected on the 1978 MWC in *Which Way Women?:* “The bonding of Mennonite women around the world is not a unity of sameness, but a unity of understanding and caring.”³⁴

Relationships Within and Beyond the Task Force

Decisions related to TF philosophy and procedures took place routinely, too often for some members. In May 1977 members were asked to comment on ideas like this: “The Task Force strengths are its shared, cooperative leadership and decision-making, shared responsibilities, relationship with the Peace Section, and its inter-Mennonite dimension.” Structural changes and staff links changed with shifts in the US Peace Section and the Canadian Peace and Social Concerns Committee. Early on, we took action to limit a person’s TF involvement to one three-year term, in order for more women to share the responsibility. Later, that limit changed to two terms, to provide more continuity. Reasons that individuals were chosen as members varied; so did member skills and vision for the work. Late in the first decade, Gayle Gerber Koontz stated that “TF membership should not be a training ground for new persons.” Commitment and knowledge of issues involved should be expected.

During those years, I continued to receive TF minutes. On occasion, I feared that some members might discontinue the organization. Two members from Ontario said women and their gifts were well received in their region. They had little need for advocacy. But . . . I thought, “True activists will address the multiple disadvantages for women that continue unchallenged.

Efforts will be needed for generations to change forever or profoundly the attitudes, stereotypes and injustices that exist.' Then I recalled the strong contributions of Sue Clemmer Steiner and Margaret Loewen Reimer, especially their work with "Report" issues. And Erna Klassen, from further west, always impressed me with the diverse themes and concerns that she brought to TF discussions. Canadian women neither assess nor address issues for women through similar lenses any more than happens 'south of the border.' So also, conflicting views will persist among Mennonites. Peggy Regehr's experience detailed in this issue of *CGR* reveals both the pain and zeal.³⁵

Task Force relationships with other Mennonite women or women's organizations have always fluctuated. Later on, a few younger women seriously criticized early activists for anger.³⁶ To charge another with anger, itself a neutral emotion, can carry judgment or can serve as a "stopper" by those who oppose a 'cause' or fail to understand 'the times.' At one point at AMBS, charges about "seven angry women" circulated. The finger pointing lessened when a campus newcomer observed, "It seems to me that the rest of you are angry toward those you call angry." On a few occasions, the TF was perceived as competitive with the more established Mission women's groups.

The Task Force often reached out toward younger, more professional and 'fringe' (or 'on the edge' of church life) churchwomen than those committed to WMSC and WM. An Ad Hoc Committee was formed to evaluate the Committee on Women's Concerns (formerly TF) after a decade. It named "target populations" for CWC endeavor: professional women, women not part of conference women's groups, women interested in women's issues, women in MCC, women on the fringes of church and conference structures, women and men in the MCC constituency who need support or to be made aware of concerns."³⁷ A question to consider: Do women's groups need to compete or be threatened by each other, if needs are expressed and being met differently? Usually, the TF has been ready to serve as a catalyst and then "let go," a phenomenon similar to releasing a child to teen years and then adulthood. While I would have preferred the TF at times to take other routes, an organization deserves freedom to make its choices and then manage the consequences.

When Emma and Joe Richards invited women in theological training to gather for the first ("unofficial") Women in Ministry seminar in Lombard,

Illinois, from April 30 to May 2, 1976, the Task Force cheered. Nancy Hardesty engaged the fifty participants in three sessions. Emma preached on “Established as a Prophet of the Lord,” a phrase from 2 Samuel. Personal stories revealed the “nontraditional route” that women were taking to enter the ministry. Vinora Weaver Salzman’s example of preaching was not raised. With the concept of ministry broadened to include anyone serving in church life, the second conference (held in Colorado) was called Persons in Ministry. Subsequent Women in Ministry conferences had a life of their own. They met in diverse Mennonite communities, the seventh in 1984 with over two hundred registered. At that meeting Virginia Mollenkott served as a key speaker; many workshops were again available.³⁸ Later, trained and ordained pastors chose to meet separately. “Women Doing Theology” (WDT) events also began; they too reflect shifts – from more academic, feminist agenda to more personal reflection. During the sixth biennial WDT – “Gifts of the Red Tent” – held in Harrisonburg in 2003, the Task Force’s thirtieth anniversary was celebrated.

Ties with Herta Funk, from her Newton, Kansas office, always inspired Task Force members. A Canadian born in Russia, she completed her Ph.D in German. From April 1975 on, TF minutes report helpful contacts. We discussed how best to use each other’s work. She informed us of conferences she attended; of meetings on women and development; of a study guide by Elizabeth and Perry Yoder, *New Men, New Roles*, launched by the General Conference; of an upcoming single adults’ retreat that she planned, of biographies of fifteen Mennonite women to be published. The intent of the collection was to reverse the trend of women’s oral history often being lost.³⁹ Herta also gathered and shared resources on leadership training for women and learned from consultants how best to structure workshops. Her death in 1989 reminded us to be diligent.

On ‘Bowling Out’

Other than answering occasional staff questions, reading Task Force materials, or planning and editing several issues of the “Report” during the decades, my involvement shifted to other feminist efforts after my term ended with the TF. Except for one other project. During the TF early years, questions surfaced about creating an essay book or a second packet of articles. After completing

my term, I was invited to gather articles for a book. *Which Way Women?* resulted in 1980. Fifteen hundred copies sold for \$3.00 each; my work was again volunteer. Linda Schmidt, then in a half-time position at Akron with women's agenda, was indispensable for getting the large format, 156-page resource printed at MCC headquarters. To use the International Women's Year themes – Equality, Development, and Peace – for clustering the 55 articles seemed right. All writers except four were Mennonites; 40 women shared their views. Wishing to highlight more, I quote from only several articles.

- “The sister concept implies bonding, availability, acceptance, trust, confrontation and reconciliation in a context that is ongoing.” – Ruth Krall, “Female Sexuality: An Open Letter to Mennonite Women”
- “The struggle to maintain a high-quality workable family life is probably the most demanding task we have ever faced.” – Rachel Friesen, “On Choosing to Combine Parenting with Occupations”
- “Having lived and worked among people who have grown up in different circumstances, with different values from my own, I find that to judge their actions on the basis of my own perspectives is increasingly difficult.” – Nelda Rhodes Thelin, “When Circumstances and Values Differ”
- “And so I must confront all that is contrary. I must confront Rocky Flats nuclear weapons facility because it violates the love that God commands me to share with others . . . I believe that there are alternatives to killing . . . to war. I will not be silent.” – Hedy Sawadsky, “Peacemaking in Colorado”⁴⁰

I conclude this rendezvous with memory with further reference to the Ad Hoc Committee created to review the Committee on Women's Concerns. Anna Juhnke was enthusiastic and generous in her June 1984 report, excerpts of which follow.

- The CWC was brought into being to speak to and for the kind of women who have always gravitated toward MCC – those Mennonite and BIC women who have felt called to serve the church and the world beyond the traditional roles
- MCC Peace Section took an early lead in providing the TF a gathering point for Mennonite feminist visions, and theological as well as social concerns.

- The creativity unleashed by this small and obscure TF, now CWC, has been astounding. The packet “Persons Becoming,” the book *Which Way Women?* and the “Report” periodical, all produced with volunteer labor, are resources of consistently high quality. . . . The new creative arts book will be another first
- The periodic efforts of the TF and CWC to influence MCC structures to be more responsive to women’s concerns are harder to assess. They have in a sporadic way subjected MCC to closer scrutiny and higher demands than the Mennonite denominational offices have received from their women’s groups
- Yet, in the context of MCC’s outstanding leadership in development and justice issues in the Third World, the blind spots that remain on development and justice for women need attention in a continuing way
- If in fact fifty percent of the qualified and experienced MCC people are female, and at least fifty percent of the Mennonite constituency is female, it seems reasonable to me to set goals of forty percent women in leadership roles and board membership by 1994⁴¹

The Ad Hoc committee of eight recommended the continued existence of the CWC, with goals and agenda related to education and networking. Encouraging the US Peace Section and Canadian Peace and Social Concerns Committee to strengthen its relations with the CWC, it recommended that MCC create a Personnel Policies Committee, hire a one-half time staff position for women’s concerns based in Akron, and increase the representation of women in its boards. And so the organization birthed thirty years ago has continued.⁴² And so, too, Virginia Woolf’s insight still guides: “To have by nature a point of view, to stick to it, to follow it where it leads, is the rarest of possessions, and lends value even to trifles.”

Notes

I wish to thank Luann Habegger Martin for reading for accuracy an early draft of this account of ‘herstory.’

¹ MCC *Women’s Concerns Report*, Jul.-Aug. 1993, 4.

² Paul Erb, “Church Service for Women,” *Gospel Herald*, Jan. 27, 1959, and Daniel Hertzler, “Keeping women quiet,” *Gospel Herald*, Apr. 4, 1989, 247. An observation: Whereas Erb’s

wife Alta Mae indeed practiced church leadership, a reflection of Paul's authentic call, Hertzler started his discussion with a 'dig': "Women are, generally speaking, generally speaking."

³ Miller 11-12, in John Hershberger, "American Mennonite Women in Church, Society, and the Home: A Twentieth Century Survey through Selected Mennonite Writings," AMBS, May 24, 1975, 10. Photocopy.

⁴ Margaret Loewen Reimer, "All we're meant to be / Total woman / etc.," *The Mennonite*, Feb. 25, 1975, 134. Ruth Heinrichs' letter in response called for both wife and husband to have both family and public roles, 374.

⁵ Minutes, Mar. 20-21, 1976.

⁶ At the same time, Bill Gotthard's 'chain-of-command' ideology taught through "Basic Youth Conflicts Seminars" had "caught on like wildfire" among some Mennonites. According to writer Wilfred Bockelman, many "satisfied customers" received his "fundamental orientation toward law rather than gospel." Bockelman connects Gotthard's "almost fascistic view of power" with people's search for "an answer man, a man with authority and power." *Christian Century*, Sept. 25, 1974, 877-80.

⁷ Transcript, "Woman's Liberation and the Christian Woman's Response," Concord Associates, Harrisonburg, VA, 1971, 52 pp.

⁸ Lois Barrett. "Preaching was her calling," *The Mennonite*, May 25, 1976, 355.

⁹ TF "Report" # 9, Oct.-Dec., 1975.

¹⁰ David Schroeder, "Jesus relates to women," *The Mennonite*, Jan. 18, 1975, 61-63.

¹¹ Elizabeth Yoder, "Mennonite Women in Pastoral Ministry: A Reflection," Photocopy, 8 pp.

¹² Dorothy Yoder Nyce, manuscript "Male and Female He Created Them," 2, 3, 4, 7. This paper later appeared as a three-part series – "Women in God's Plan and Man's World," *Gospel Herald*, August 1973. *GH* mistakenly printed the series catchword *interdependence* as "Independence" in a subtitle! John Hershberger commends "Nyce's theological depth, clarity, and frankness . . . its example of a more critically constructive hermeneutic." 21.

¹³ MCC Peace Section Minutes, Mar. 29-31, Business item # 23, p. 7.

¹⁴ Over the years, the Newsletter, now titled *Women's Concerns Report*, met a few explicit interventions. A photo of a nude woman had to be cut from an issue on "Women and Body Image," and lesbian voices were recently cut from print. And so justice work continues. Early on I had asked, "Is there a danger in our human relationships having been 'peace-oriented' without the essence of peace (well-being)?"

¹⁵ Gayle Gerber Koontz, "Christian Feminism: An Introduction," *Persons Becoming* packet, Apr. 1974.

¹⁶ Margaret Loewen Reimer, "Task Force Tackles Women's Concerns," *Mennonite Weekly Review*, June 24, 1976.

¹⁷ Larry Kehler, "Some imbalance remains in MCC structure," *Mennonite Reporter* 5/3, Feb. 3, 1975.

¹⁸ Dorothy Yoder Nyce, manuscript, "Women in Church Vocations, Institutions, Structures," 3-5, 8.

¹⁹ *Intercom* 15/2, Feb. 1975, 2.

²⁰ I refrained from publicly sharing my legitimate rejoinders. At the April 1975 TF meeting, we discussed minority women; soon thereafter Margaret Allen (African American) attended meetings

and Emma LaRoque (First Nation) served as a TF member for a year after Canadians were involved.

²¹ TF Minutes, Apr. 5, 1975, 2.

²² Harold Jantz. "Equal and Distinct," *Menmonite Brethren Herald*, May 30, 1975, 9.

²³ Correspondence, Luann Habegger, Feb. 18, 1977.

²⁴ TF "Report" # 9, Oct.-Dec. 1975, 7.

²⁵ Luann Habegger, "Trip Report," 3.

²⁶ I choose to give a detailed account of the negotiation process. Of such history (memory) is the experience of many less powerful groups or individuals.

²⁷ Correspondence, Katie Funk Wiebe, May 25, 1976.

²⁸ Correspondence, Luann Habegger, Jan. 3, 1977, 2.

²⁹ Correspondence, Paul Kraybill, Apr. 5, 1977.

³⁰ Correspondence, Luann Habegger, Apr. 22, 1977.

³¹ Correspondence, Paul Kraybill, Apr. 29, 1977.

³² Correspondence, Gladys Goering, May 13, 1977.

³³ I cannot help but mention here my recent fundraising effort to assist four women from India to attend the 2003 MWC in Zimbabwe – no correspondence with "the management" involved.

³⁴ Gladys Goering. "Mennonite World Conference, 1978, and Women: Some Reflections," in *Which Way Women?*, Dorothy Yoder Nyce, ed. (Akron: MCC, 1980), 133.

³⁵ Jim Juhnke's haunting comment exists for women to ponder. From the Kauffman/Harder diagnosis of the Mennonite pulse, he observed: "Mennonite men today are more open to women's equality in the church than are Mennonite women!" *Gospel Herald*, May 13, 1975, 362.

³⁶ "We are other than they . . . all of us have benefited from their struggles. We feel a certain solidarity with them, yet we cannot share their kinds of anger. We are the next generation. We have grown up assuming our position as valuable members of the 'body.' We do not feel a need to react as strongly as 'our mothers' because we cannot fully understand the injustices they feel." Julia Spicher, Susan Huber, Rebecca Rittgers, and Melanie Zuercher, "New voices at Bethlehem '83, young women speak out," *Gospel Herald*, Sept. 6, 1983, 628.

³⁷ Minutes, Ad Hoc Committee, June 1984.

³⁸ The Third WIM took place in Akron, Pennsylvania in 1978, the fourth at AMBS in Elkhart, Indiana in 1979, the fifth at Bethel College, Newton, Kansas in 1981, the sixth in Kitchener, Ontario in 1982, and the seventh in Harrisonburg, Virginia in 1984.

³⁹ "Biographies on women wanted for publication," *Mennonite Reporter*, March 17, 1975.

⁴⁰ *Which Way Women?*, 29, 39, 77, 153.

⁴¹ Anna Juhnke, "Reflections on the Committee on Women's Concerns and Women in MCC," prepared for the Ad Hoc evaluation committee, June 1984, 1, 3.

⁴² Consult also "Report" #s 50, 109, 165 and www.mcc.org/us/womensconcerns/anniversary/index.html

Canadian Women's Concerns

Peggy Unruh Regehr

I was asked to speak specifically about the difficulties of the beginning years of Women's Concerns in MCC Canada. That is particularly difficult for me, even now after all these years. I would much rather have spoken about the good and satisfying things that happened – and there were many, many of those – especially in my interactions with women from Ontario to British Columbia. There really was a lot to celebrate in the responses I received from so many women, and even some men. Before I begin, I want to make it clear that my references to “MCC” are to MCC Canada.

It is exactly nineteen years ago, in May 1984, that the binational Women's Concerns Committee met in Winnipeg, where they were also discussing the possibility of establishing a Women's Concerns position within MCC. Esther Wiens from Winnipeg, who was on the committee, had invited me, together with several other Mennonite women from Winnipeg, to join in the discussion. It was an interesting discussion and I entered into it wholeheartedly. Towards the end of the meetings, one member informally suggested that I apply for the position.

I had never considered such a move, as I was happy with my life at that time. But the more I thought about it, the more I knew this was the opportunity of a lifetime to put my deep concerns about women's lives into a context in which I might make a difference. So I applied and was given the task.

The work began very slowly. The Peace and Social Concerns Director, under whom I was to work, was in the process of leaving, and his replacement had not yet been appointed. I struggled to find out just what I was to be doing. I met with various program directors in the office to see where our efforts might intersect. But they were really not interested. I met with women's organizations in the larger community who were addressing women's needs, both within Winnipeg and overseas, to see what their experience was, and where and what I might do within MCC. The early going was extremely slow, and I often became discouraged since the Women's Concerns position had been established without a clear definition of its purpose or task.

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One difficulty I faced was that the board was made up of representatives of the various Canadian Mennonite conferences supporting it. But the conferences also felt they had their own theological stance on women, and they did not want MCC to be addressing any issues with theological or life style implications that went counter to that stance. While this was understandable, it also made it almost impossible to address women's leadership roles in Mennonite churches and organizations. Yet that is where my greatest interests lay at the time.

It was not until later that I found the issue I would concentrate on, while not neglecting the others. I attended a one-week Marie Fortune workshop for pastors in Saskatoon and met the first Mennonite woman whom I knew had been abused. Then I found more abused women among MCC staff and everywhere I went. Abuse was not a popular issue within our Mennonite community. But it was one that became, and still is, a major focus for Women's Concerns staff in Canada.

The work I began to do on this issue led me in many different directions. There were always those who either did not want to believe this [abuse] was happening in our circles or just wanted it to go away. But I worked hard, and spoke about it in my presentations wherever I went in the constituency. Very slowly some of the skepticism vanished. And every time I spoke about it, women let me know about their own experience or that of their daughters or mothers. It was heartbreaking to hear their stories. I also began working together with the newly formed Domestic Violence Task Force, with the preparation of the "Purple Packet," the first information we put out.

I also found myself being a confidante to women working within MCC. Some of them also had stories of various types of abuse at home or in their workplaces. Even the MCC office was not always a safe place for them.

One of the most difficult things to deal with was the pressures and criticisms that were focused on me personally because of my position. It seemed easier to be critical of me than to address the real issues – whether from staff, Executive, or Board. Some people were supportive, but their voices were not always heard. Others would have preferred no women's program and no staff person. So I never had a sense of security in what I was doing.

Early on, there was pressure from some board members who wished me out of the picture. I never knew the whole story, but either the Executive or Board passed a motion to put me on probation for a year. I was never told

why, what I might have done wrong, or where I was to improve. It was a probation without any way of my being able to address the issues. As the year ended it was never mentioned, with neither a “yes” nor a “no” for the future. It just seemed like business as usual.

Periodically I also heard from female support staff within the office about their positions within MCC. They were often on Voluntary Service, and even when they had worked for a significant period, it was difficult for them to get on salary. When they did, their pay was low. As a result, when the Hayes Commission salary grid was presented to MCC for discussion, these women strongly opposed it, as it was a particularly male dominant structure with the supposed male dominant characteristics given higher value and higher salaries. But, as I heard recently, it was eventually implemented anyway – something we had hoped to deflect.

I tried to force the issue of women’s pay by asking for a salary for myself. I was the only program director in the Canadian Programs on Voluntary Service. Men at a lower level in the organization were receiving salary after two years, and I thought I should be treated equitably. I wanted mediation but got arbitration instead. The arbitration committee found in my favor and I was finally granted a salary. Then, after only a few months on salary and after a very faulty evaluation procedure, I was told I would be terminated. I suspected those two events were related, though I believe the domestic violence issue also played a major role in it.

At that point I felt I had nothing more to lose in the next months. My efforts with domestic violence issues continued, my support of the women working within MCC continued, and I had tremendous support from many women in the constituency.

Why did I stay as long as I did? First, I felt the work was important, even if it sometimes seemed only symbolic. Nor did I want to let down the women in the constituency who felt it was important for them. I knew I was addressing important issues for women whether at home, at the office, or in the work force; whether they were abused as children or as adult women; whether they were fearful or frustrated, younger or older. They all needed support in some way. Their lives and their concerns motivated me to stay.

Supportive people also helped me through difficult times. I mention them in no special order here. Emily Will in the office in Akron was a special support to me, as were the members of the Canadian Women’s Concerns

Committee and the bi-national committee. They were wonderful to work with. Other women in the Winnipeg office supported me in many different ways. Leona and Peter Penner – new staff people in Peace and Social Concerns – were for some time the persons that Women’s Concerns was responsible to. Their support and encouragement was more than I could have hoped for. There were many others as well, too numerous to mention. Last, but never least, was my husband Walter, who stood by me through thick and thin, who encouraged me and let me know my work was important, and who allowed me to rant, rave, or cry as circumstances warranted. Each of these people deserves some credit for the continuation of the work during those four-and-a-half years.

It was a work that I cherished regardless of what I experienced. I do not ever regret having been involved with it. Personally, it sums up a great part of any legacy I may have left for the future. It may have been ever so small, but it was important to me. While I set the work in motion, it was Kathy Shantz, my successor, who toiled tirelessly on the abuse issue. Reading her summary of what she accomplished over her eight years with Women’s Concerns makes one wonder where she found the time and energy to do everything she did.

I also want to mention Esther Epp Thiessen, who took over during Kathy’s maternity leave, and those who followed her in the Women’s Concerns program – Eleanor Epp Stobbe and Kathryn Loewen Mitchell – who also had difficult times at MCC.

But these women did more than just continue what I had begun. They developed a network of women from across Canada who would carry the agenda forward in the various provinces. Now, nineteen years after the program began in Canada, it is again in jeopardy. No staff person is in place, and with the significant budget cuts coming to MCC, there is again talk of cutting the program, especially since people are still unsure what it should look like. This is unfortunate.

Somehow, the circle always seems to come back to the beginning, and it is necessary for us as women to work again for what we feel is important. Whether that is in a different form from the past or a revamping of the old, there continue to be issues around women’s lives that must be addressed. We need to be constantly moving into the future and its new demands. That is the challenge before all of us, not just the staff people on the front lines. Without your support, the work is just too difficult.

My Impressions of the Early Years of the Women's Task Force

Katie Funk Wiebe

How can I sum up, in fifteen minutes, thirty years of reaching for the freedom of a bluebird flying high in the sky? How can we as a group of Mennonite women bring together the bewilderments, the feelings of being pushed aside or ridiculed, with the joy of sensing slow movement forward on this incredible journey we have made together? My personal voyage to self-discovery as a Mennonite churchwoman has been a never-ending roller coaster ride, yet here I am, not where I began, but on a higher, surer level. Let me mention a few highlights of this journey and the way it connected with the broader efforts of the Women's Task Force.

I have been involved with women's concerns for more than thirty years, writing, speaking, acting on committees, and just being. At first it was a lonely journey, because I thought I was walking alone and therefore there must be something wrong with me. I was a misfit. I felt God's call to ministry, but the doors always swung shut when I tried to walk through them. Why was I misinterpreting God's voice so consistently?

Then, in 1974, I attended the Evangelical Women's Caucus held in Washington, DC. I came apprehensively, wondering whether I would find a group of raging women libbers with swinging breasts and hostility toward men etched all over their faces. I found a large group of mostly gentle but bruised women, many of whom wept to be among people who did not judge them. I had entered a huge red tent. The gathering, a first for the evangelical Christian community, was a time of finding one another as sisters in Christ because of our common cause. Of the 300 women present, about 30 were from Mennonite denominations. The late Herta Funk, a vigorous Mennonite women's leader, called us together for a breakfast. I wish she could be here this evening to see what has happened since then. But at that conference and later ones, I found myself bonding with a community that did not see me as a nut case.

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I became a member of the MCC Women's Task Force as the Mennonite Brethren (MB) representative and helped with a few issues of the Women's Task Force Report. I was not appointed by the MBs and had no one to report to. I had no sending body. Yet I was worried how I would be perceived by my church constituency, which as a body had not yet found the need to travel the journey towards gender equality. And I did want to be accepted by them as a normal person.

I was never quite sure what I was doing on the Task Force, for my experience and preparation was haphazard. I realize now that as a Task Force we weren't always quite sure what direction to head toward. We had no precedents. But I couldn't silence the voice that told me it was wrong to describe women's role only in terms of limitations rather than opportunities. If something is evil and sinful, it should be spoken against. I couldn't understand how conference resolutions could confirm women with words yet leave them powerless in practice.

By then, the women's movement in society generally was in full swing, with those who spoke up openly receiving a full dose of ridicule and trivialization. Writing about the issue was often a monologue, not a discussion. I eagerly read publications like *Daughters of Sarah*, the *Priscilla Papers*, and others. I lined my shelves with all the new books being published about women's roles. I carefully watched what was going on in the broader Mennonite constituency and elsewhere. I clung to these contacts like a rope flung to someone who is drowning. I welcomed every opportunity for ministry that came from them. In addition to my concerns for women in ministry, I was struggling to work my way through issues related to widowhood, being manless in a coupled world, and bringing up four children alone. This added another kind of discrimination – and still does.

It took me a while to accept that decisions regarding women's ministry were actually a political issue related to power rather than theology. In 1982, after a disappointing MB conference discussion of the matter, I wrote to our publications: "I never planned my life this way [referring to being a woman in ministry]. All I promised the Lord at difficult junctures was to enter doors God opened and not break my head and spirit pounding against those closed to me. Yet I'll admit to yearning for the moral and spiritual support of my conference in my service." It was slow coming.

I continued to write and travel. One MB pastor asked me, “Does your concern for women’s lib obsess you?” I sensed I was being perceived as a one-issue person. The daughter of a troubled woman was sent to get a good look at me at a women’s conference in British Columbia. She was convinced I would look like a German Gestapo woman with severely cut dark hair, wearing a dark suit, and exhibiting a harsh, curt manner. The daughter was surprised to find me fairly gentle-looking and moderate in my approach.

I sensed more and more that we who were speaking out for women’s ministries in the church were threatening the well-being of women who preferred things the way they were. Some were certain that if we spoke up for women, we must hate men. My article, “Color me a person,” was clipped and sent to me with little negative comments written all over it to highlight this hatred in the sender’s between-the-lines reading. If only she knew how much I yearned for male companionship in my solo journey!

Another highlight of my journey was the first Women in Ministry conference in Elkhart, followed several years later by the first Women Doing Theology conference in Kitchener. These conferences were overtly political acts, as they brought women of the Anabaptist community together. They were necessary to give the women identity and support, and to make this conference today possible.

At the Kitchener conference in 1992, I gave an address on “What? Me a Theologian?” I noticed two things at this event: (1) the women present were younger. A newer group was stepping into place, an encouraging sign; (2) however, many were still angry, openly threatening to leave the church. Already some did not understand the pain some of us older ones had gone through in breaking new theological ground in the church.

I told them the story of my husband’s ordination in 1953. At the end of a daylong celebration, I collected my children and headed home. As I took off my new black velvet hat late that afternoon, I noticed that the sweaty fingerprints of the visiting minister, who had laid his hands on my head in prayer, had left permanent indentations. And it was such a lovely hat. Thereafter I wore the mark of ordination on my head, although I had made no public promises and received no formal instructions or blessing for my role as a minister’s wife. The women at the conference laughed. And it came to me that it was actually funny, not something to cry over. This painful journey needed more humor.

At the Millersville women's history conference, I experienced another highlight. I found women who once felt exiled from the Mennonite community circling back. I also found those who had decided to stick with the church despite hindrances to their service. They saw light ahead. What a joy to hear from women who had deliberately chosen membership in the Anabaptist community because of its spiritual strengths! Another name for the Millersville conference might have been "Coming Home."

My personal journey continued. I was often pushed to the brink when I received phone calls, some in anguish, as for example, one from a young professional woman who felt perplexed by her findings about what the Bible actually taught about women as opposed to what she had been taught. Other calls encouraged me. One morning the phone rang. I had been debating whether to get out of my bed early or to enjoy its comfort for another fifteen minutes. The voice on the line was Ruth Brunk Stolfus, a pioneer in women's ministry from Virginia. She gave me a word of affirmation for what I was doing. And the day began – joyously. Thanks to her, I could go to my teaching duties, not feeling like a mashed banana but like the flag bearer at the front of the parade. God loved me. Ruth loved me.

I found I had to give myself permission to speak in public, a scary thing in the early years. I could write a book about what it is like to be a woman speaker in a constituency that finds this entity something akin to a dog walking on its hind legs. At one of the first times I spoke, I prepared zealously. At the end of the women's rally, I noticed a woman barreling her way down the center aisle at full speed. I was certain she was going to laud me for the pearls of wisdom that had fallen from my lips. Her first words were, "Katie, where did you get your dress? Did you make it? Where did you buy the pattern?" After I have finished speaking, it is not a surprise to have someone ask me if I am a visitor that day and what my name is. This has occurred even while I was wearing a corsage, once the requisite item for a guest woman speaker. So much for trying to make an impression!

Pulpits were usually too tall, intended for tall men. With my trifocals I was sometimes unable to read my notes. Once the metal buttons on my jacket rattled every time I moved my arms. Often there was no microphone. My voice didn't carry like that of a basso profundo. I remember one pulpit built like an airplane, with inward sloping wings. My notes and Bible slid into

the trough in the middle. Often I pondered what I should try to sound like. Should I thunder like Tony Campolo and strike the pulpit, or speak in more modulated tones? Or should I sit with head bowed in prayer, as I had seen many male preachers do?

Once I was sure I was lost in the funhouse. I was staying in a very large home with several other guests. The upper floor had at least eight to ten doors, all the same. I got up at night to go to the bathroom and couldn't remember which door it was. No door had a half-moon on it. I cautiously opened one door to find a man sleeping. I retreated even more cautiously.

Once I arrived at an airport, about fifty miles from my destination, to find no one to meet me. Everyone had assumed someone else would do so. I had no personal phone number, only an institutional number. After waiting many hours into the night, I finally hitched a ride with strangers to my destination, where I phoned relatives and asked for a bed. I've been in an airport and had my host say, "I didn't expect you to look like this." On several occasions after finishing my assignment, I found those in charge didn't have money to pay my expenses. I'll admit I've asked myself as I made my way to the airport at five in the morning, "Why am I doing this?" There were times I arrived home late Sunday night to a snow-covered parking lot at the airport, wearing dress shoes and unable to distinguish my car from the others.

Well, I could go on and on. If there was criticism from some people, there was always encouragement from others. When I was approached a number of years ago to become editor of *Rejoice!*, the inter-Mennonite devotional magazine, one man of the asking group said quite openly, "I don't think it will matter that you are a woman." A brighter moment occurred when I heard recently from an MB scholar working on a thesis on the role of women in the MB Church. He sent me drafts of his paper and quite surprised me by the way he traced my writing about women's issues in MB periodicals.

The journey is never over. The goal is never accomplished. You younger women will have different obstacles to overcome. But some will be the same as those we had. I noticed a recent letter from a woman in *Mennonite Weekly Review*, asking "How can women have a call from God when God doesn't call women?" I have found it is important to hang onto a central core of identity as someone God loves and has called to serve, regardless of gender, race, class, or age. My hope is that you will study women's history so that you will never forget the road that others traveled for you.

Comments from Two MCC US Women's Concerns Advisory Committee Members

1. Moniqua Acosta

My relationship with MCC US Women's Concerns started in May 2001, with the domestic violence conference for the Latino Churches, when I was so moved by the wonderful progressive work Women's Concerns was facilitating for my people.

I later found myself working for Women's Concerns for almost a year, filling in as staff associate while the director was on sabbatical. I was blessed and nourished spiritually and mentally by the time I spent at the desk. I was able to connect with many women on a number of levels – from the Network of Survivors of Abuse to our Canadian counterparts.

The fruits of my time with Women's Concerns are evident in my home congregation and in my personal life. I am able to share with my home church, especially the women. At times it is challenging to work with those who accept all they are told and never question a thing. But I am sure it is equally challenging to them to have a young woman like me asking too many questions and stirring up their comfort zones. We are all growing together.

In my home life I catch myself changing the words of the children's books I read to my daughters in order to make the depiction of women not so meek.

I am very excited and determined to see the work of Women's Concerns become a reality for more women everywhere. As our mission statement says, we “work for the dignity and development of women, and [seek] to encourage mutuality and empowerment in our relationships with other women and with men.”

This is important work, educating my church and myself.

Moniqua Acosta is a bilingual caseworker with Big Brothers Big Sisters of Lancaster County in Lancaster, PA.

2. Maribel Ramirez Hinojosa

It is an honor to be in the midst of such matriarchs. And I feel honored to be part of MCC, specifically with Women's Concerns. My involvement with MCC US Women's Concerns began while I was in graduate school and was asked to write an article for the newsletter, *Women's Concerns Report*. I later served as a compiler for a bilingual issue on domestic violence, and now am an advisory board member for the Women's Concerns Desk. I have seen the growth it has had in the short time I have been involved with the committee. Particularly, Latinos and Latinas in our Spanish-speaking congregations have come to learn more about Women's Concerns, mostly through the bilingual periodicals and through the domestic violence workshop held in Pennsylvania, which sparked several local workshops throughout the United States, including California, Texas, and Florida.

What future do I see for Women's Concerns? I see it as a platform for women to continue to share their voices, women from different racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. I see it as being more inclusive of the wider constituency in order to give everyone an equal opportunity to share their story. For it is through this process of sharing our stories that we will learn from each other, and draw closer to each other and to God. I also envision Women's Concerns continuing to strengthen the resources it currently offers and creatively exploring other areas of growth. I particularly visualize an anti-sexism training that can be offered to the broader constituency, in which women can begin to experience true freedom in our Creator, a workshop in which God's justice can prevail and hope and equality can be spread.

I commend Women's Concerns for assertively addressing issues specifically related to women. To all those who have come before me, I say, Thank you, and to all those who are yet to come, I say, Take on the challenge, there is much work to be done.

I would like to end by reading a portion of Victor Villasenor's *Thirteen Senses: A Memoir*. He is writing about his family. This book contains strong

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women's voices and illustrates the power of women sharing their stories with each other and the impact those stories make on women's lives. I think that no matter what point we are at in our lives, we all have something to share as women of God.

Work, *mi hijita*, is a woman's power. Her relaxation and sanity. Her way of coming to terms with life's twists and turns, and not lose her way. After all, remember that it is written in that stars that men came from the rock, the wind, and the fire! And we women came from the flower, the tree, the soil, the water, and hence, any healthy woman can consume a man's fire as easy as water can consume any little flame.

Why do you think men are so weak and chase the wind? Because down deep they know that the time of their molten fire is short-lived. Whereas women are strong, knowing deep inside of themselves that all life comes from them, and they are the eternal soil for planting and the rain comes from the Heavens and replenishes the rivers and lakes and even the very sea.

So always know, *mi hijita*, [and I would add, all of you women who are present] that you are *una lluvia de oro*, a rain of gold, sent by God to do your work for the survival of all humankind. We are the power, we women are *el eje*, the center, the hub *de nuestras familias*, and in this knowledge, then our hearts are INDESTRUCTIBLE!

– Victor Villasenor, *Thirteen Senses: A Memoir*
(Harper Collins, 2001), 142.

Thank you and may God bless you.

AFTERWORD

Gifts of the Red Tent: Women Creating

Lydia Harder

I enter the Red Tent eagerly as one who has followed the “Doing Theology” conferences with great interest and personal investment. I bring with me memories of the first conference in 1992, which I helped to plan. What we were envisioning at that point in history was no less than a transformation of Anabaptist Mennonite theology to include women’s voices and women’s concerns. The active verb “doing” was important, because it highlighted our conviction that theology was a practice rather than merely a theoretical idea. In contrast to an Anabaptist “vision” or ideal, these conferences would consciously stress women’s agency and women’s active involvement in the reflections and conversations that help us make theological sense of our lives. Thus there was a political undercurrent associated with this title, suggesting the anger, pain, and struggle that accompanied women as they entered the public domain of Mennonite theology, long dominated by male voices.

By including the stories and reflections on thirty years of work by MCC Women’s Concerns, the 2003 conference planners ensured that this political agenda was not ignored. Theology is always done in the context of institutions and structures that tend to force it into static statements limiting the participation of all people. It was therefore important to rehearse this recent history through various voices to see how women’s theological work is impacting institutions as well as personal journeys. However, far more than we understood it a dozen years ago, the conference planners realized that sexism and racism sometimes enter the Red Tent itself. Thus questions of systemic exclusion and just dialogue remain as primary ethical questions judging our theological endeavors, even when we attempt to create places of safety and shelter for a particular group of people.

The term “Women Creating” can, therefore, refer first of all to the creation of a place, a gathering, a community that in its interactions embodies characteristics of the coming of God’s reign on earth as it is in heaven. How

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to create conversation inviting each person into the circle continues to be a key issue in doing theology. This may be as simple as choosing a particular format for a conference or a particular language that does not exclude others. But it also probes the broader conversation carried on by those who formally articulate the theology of any community. Who are our scholars talking to, as they do theology? What choices do they make in their daily work as theologians of the church?

Because women are entering into the “middle” of a formal theological conversation that has gone on without them for a long time, they cannot ignore the history and tradition that has developed. However, they can decide to use what has been handed down to them in new and creative ways. They can incorporate present experiences of women that challenge unarticulated assumptions. They can use language that is inclusive. Thus their experience can bring a new critical and constructive voice to the conversation.

Clearly, the women who gave the scholarly papers at the 2003 event were not all taking the same approach to doing theology. Yet it is interesting to see that each of the papers returned to the biblical heritage in order to provide an alternative to the approach that has long dominated theological conversations. For example, Malinda Berry moves from the philosophical to the biblical to regain a sense of wonder at God’s active disclosure of another world where peace, justice, and freedom reign. This sense of awe and wonder allows her to claim the empowerment of the Spirit as she incorporates some elements of the past, revises other aspects, and contributes with joy to the creative process of knowing, loving, and enjoying God with her whole being. Her anticipation that God will bring about God’s will allows her to actively participate in the creative work of justice making. Her paper makes most sense in the context of the variety of artistic expressions of wonder that the printed page does not include but that have been crucial parts of these conferences from the beginning.

Rita Finger’s paper is more traditional in its format, with biblical interpretation followed by a suggested application. However, in her imaginative reconstruction of the story beneath the texts, she attempts to create analogies to the struggle we have today in becoming a hospitable community. Her format also invited the women present to make theological observations and to ask new questions, thus attempting to build bridges between scholarly theology

and the “everyday” practical theology that all women do. She points out how food preparation and serving create not only welcome but also controversies among those doing that work. Can the Lord’s Supper be integrated with such material concerns, so that every meal becomes sacramental in embodying the welcome Jesus gave everyone he encountered?

Iris de León-Hartshorn begins with learnings from her own Mexican history, which includes courageous and loving women who sought to bring creation back into balance by engaging the Creator, even as they were forced to wander due to domination and violence by the church. Her search for harmony continues with reflection on biblical texts in which the violence of Sarah and Abraham toward Hagar is lifted out for our appraisal and judgment. For her, it is the intervention of God that redeems those stories and allows us to seek God’s intervention in our own lives of wandering. It is the creation of resting places along the way, where we can be liberated to see new possibilities and to be transformed into persons of courage, that is crucial. She sees the time in the Red Tent as one of those resting places.

For each of these women, doing theology includes creating places of wonder and welcome where God’s Spirit can actively intervene to transform structures and people. So it was interesting for me to read about the birthing of an organization, MCC Women’s Concerns, to see whether some of the wonder, welcome, and wandering was also represented in these more concrete stories and recollections.

Clearly, it is a theology of welcome and hospitality that created the unrest within women who had become convinced radical welcome is integral to the gospel message. However, it seems that the wandering theme ran deepest through the memories. Though deliberately anchored in peace and justice theology, the women activists felt lonely, and frequently dominated by male agenda, as they attempted to seek justice within established church structures. The reason for wandering was often not their own choice but the abuse of power by others. They often experienced having to go back to places where they felt oppressed and dominated, because they felt the call of God to do just that. Yet crucial to the wandering were the times of refreshment when small groups of women formed networks to empower each other anew for the task ahead. Those were the moments of wonder, of self-discovery, of freedom and joy in becoming the persons God had called them to be. As we

follow those memories we sense a growing sensitivity to the various groupings that had not been part of past theological discussions, beginning with themselves but growing to include women of color, lesbian women, women of all ages, women of the global community, and finally extending to all peoples who feel excluded.

This brings me to a crucial question: How exactly is the symbol of the Red Tent understood? I discovered a variety of interpretations, each raising questions for the future. First of all, the Tent represents the women-centered nature of theology that could be done in that place, a place set aside for women to reflect on their needs and experiences. Thus the Tent is crucial and necessary. But how is this theology related to the theology done in other places? Where are the places in which women-centered theology and male-centered theology interact, so that each can more fully focus on God who created males and females in God's image? Where are the places for nurturing wholeness and relationships between males and females? It seems the answer given is that the church, in all its structures, must become a primary place of conversation and dialogue so that it can truly be a sign of the coming "kinship" of God. Thus the Red Tent can only be a resting place as we work toward mutual conversation in the church and society.

However, as a resting place, the Red Tent serves to liberate voices that have been silenced. In the intimacy of that place, sharing happens that is not yet ready to be proclaimed publicly but given a chance to mature and grow through more personal and private conversations. The *Women's Concerns Report* has been a vehicle for voices lacking confidence and needing empowerment. The bonding of women with similar concerns is needed to break the cycles and patterns of abuse still tolerated in our churches and our society.

However, the Red Tent may not always be welcoming, even to all women. Multicultural tokenism and subtle forms of prejudice enter it even as justice and peace are proclaimed. The subtle class systems women have internalized are also part of those gathered under the Tent. In the reports of the 2003 conference, I sensed women were more ready to come to terms with their own inner demons and to hold each other accountable in the comparative safety of the Red Tent. For that safety is assured not only by other women but by the God who is the ultimate shelter and protection of those under the Tent.

Yet, the conference theme deliberately spoke of the *gifts* of the Red Tent. Gifts are there to be given and then received. The ultimate question I wrestle with is how to create a public place where these gifts can be freely given and received by men and women alike. I am presently teaching a pastors seminar, “Women’s Voices in Mennonite Theology.” (I cannot imagine a course entitled “Men’s Voices in Mennonite Theology,” can you?) Although the vast majority of pastors are male, only two men are represented in the class of seventeen students. As I look over the footnotes of many recent books by Mennonite theologians, I realize that their serious conversation partners do not yet include women. Thus the challenge of the Red Tent continues to be how to give the gifts nurtured within its safety, so that others can also gain a glimpse of the wonder that women have seen of God’s intervention in their wanderings.

So I leave the Red Tent in order to enter again the conversation of the church and society. I leave with renewed confidence that God the Creator has called us to be co-creators of language that can communicate God’s welcome to all people. I am newly empowered to again “do theology” by opening myself to transformation, by challenging structures that are exclusive, and by proclaiming anew the wonder of God’s welcome.

Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S. J. *Spiritual Exercises: Based on Paul's Epistle to the Romans*. Eerdmans, 2004.

If Joseph Fitzmyer set out to cook up “chicken soup for the soul,” the result is a hearty stew indeed, complete with big chunks of meat and vegetables – though a tad short on the spices. Fitzmyer, who wrote the detailed commentary on Romans for the Anchor Bible series, here uses his vast knowledge of this letter to provide a series of exercises that can be used for devotional purposes. The title, *Spiritual Exercises*, refers to the method developed by the sixteenth-century monk Ignatius of Loyola as a way of “preparing . . . our soul to rid itself of all disordered affection and . . . of seeking and finding God’s will in the ordering of our life for the salvation of our soul” (quoted, 9). Fitzmyer structures his 24 exercises using this method. Each chapter is only 7-8 pages long and includes the Romans text, discussion of its main ideas, questions for spiritual reflection, and a psalm with some relation to the Romans text.

This book was first published in 1995 and was reissued last year by Eerdmans with a new preface. As a professor at a Christian college, I am only too aware of the yawning chasm between lay Christians and biblical scholars, so Fitzmyer is to be commended for working to bridge this gap. Nevertheless, though less technical than his commentary, this book will call forth commitment and determined effort by laypersons to plumb its depths. While the author writes in clear and accessible language and omits footnotes, he does not water down Paul’s theology and extensive interaction with the Hebrew Bible.

However, although studying Romans has been a deeply spiritual experience for me, Fitzmyer’s approach is not mine. Over the past generation or more, a new paradigm for interpreting Romans has emerged which seeks to understand the social situation of the Jews and Gentiles in the Roman house churches. (John Toews’s recent commentary on Romans in the Believers Church series exemplifies this approach.) Fitzmyer is certainly familiar with these new insights and interacts with some of them, but they do not frame his entire discussion. Rather, he extracts a more abstract theology from Romans and seeks immediately to apply it to the individual reader’s spiritual life. For example, concepts like “sin” and “faith” are seen as personal

rather than communal; often readers must supply their own assumptions of what is considered sinful or righteous.

Further, Fitzmyer limits the purpose of Romans to Paul's introduction of himself and his gospel to a church he has never visited but hopes to visit in the future (2-3). By stressing personal salvation, Fitzmyer follows a traditional interpretive paradigm, whereas other scholars have recently framed their interpretation around the conflict between Jews and Gentiles in Rome caused in part by the political marginalization of Jews under the Emperor Claudius.

Though using the social sciences to understand the Romans letter may seem a devious way to obtain personal meaning from it, I believe it is the particularities [of the social setting] that can better address current issues like racism, church conflict between conservatives and liberals, reconciliation among believers, or the role of women in church leadership. Much can be learned about the socio-political situation in Rome from the names in Romans 16:1-16, including Phoebe's role as Paul's patron in traveling to Rome and interpreting his letter to the believers there. Yet Fitzmyer dispatches this section at the end of the book in one paragraph (216-17).

Fitzmyer also suggests in his preface that Romans 1-8 is more important than the rest of the letter (4), even though the section comprising chapters 9-11 is the theological climax of the letter, and chapters 12-15 are the ethical demands that flow from the theology of chapters 1-11. In this sense, his approach seems more Lutheran than Roman Catholic (his religious background) or Anabaptist.

Nevertheless, *Spiritual Exercises* may be congenial to Christians familiar with a traditional interpretation. It is definitely congruent with traditional assumptions about interior spirituality, especially as articulated by Ignatius of Loyola. For readers aware of how easily distracted one can become in our complicated and commercialized society, this book provides a focus and plenty of nourishment on the journey toward spiritual maturity.

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Harry Loewen. *Shepherds, Servants and Prophets: Leadership among the Russian Mennonites (ca. 1880-1960)*. Pandora Press/Herald Press, 2003.

I first became aware of a few of the significant Russian Mennonite leaders in my small orb during my formative years at Canadian Mennonite Bible College (CMBC). I met J.J. Thiessen, then chair of the board of CMBC, and marveled at his recall of student names. Through family lore I heard about David Toews, friend to my grandfather Cornelius Harder, an “aeltester” in Alberta. Toews officiated at my grandfather’s second marriage, leaving a hilarious story in our memory bank.

At CMBC I also became aware of the ending of that era of strong church leaders. There was a strong critique, not only of some of the individual leaders but of the entire “bishop” system where too much power and authority, it was said, rested in these Mennonite “popes”. We have gone through a long period of pendulum swings between giving too much power to leaders and taking away their power and authority, between putting too much emphasis on office and then too much on function.

It is good to read these leadership stories in our context of struggling rather continuously with power and authority, especially in terms of pastoral leadership. We probably will never recover the era of strong Mennonite leaders profiled so well in this book. And probably we shouldn’t. But did they, in their era, faithfully lead the Mennonite people? The answer to that, of course, is varied.

Harry Loewen describes three types of leadership which emerged in Russia, and profiles each of them in this book. (1) “The primary form of leadership was at the congregational level and might be considered as ‘spiritual’ or ‘pastoral’ leadership” (elders, ministers and deacons). (2) “In the Russian context another kind of ‘practical’ leadership emerged, more secular in form, and often concerned with economic affairs and government-Mennonite linkages” (administrators and politicians). (3) “Finally there was intellectual leadership which developed in connection with schooling and higher forms of education” (educators, writers, preacher-teachers) [pp. 12-13]. I appreciated this broad sweep and the inclusion of leaders from each area.

I also appreciated reading about many Mennonite Brethren leaders whom I in the General Conference had heard about only generally if at all.

That gave a much broader and complete scope to my sense of the Russian Mennonite story. I was also intrigued by the inclusion of the stories of some leaders on the fringe of Mennonite respectability: people like David Penner who condemned Mennonites in his 1930 book, *Anti-Menno*; David Schellenberg, who became a communist writer and ridiculed his people; and Walter Quiring, who was anti-Semitic and a Nazi sympathizer, and who rejected Mennonite non-resistance as a “bankrupt” doctrine.

The exclusion of any women leaders from a volume such as this is glaringly obvious. Loewen acknowledges that “None of the individuals dealt with are women. There were few women who would have fitted the chronological or thematic parameters of this collection. The historical circumstances of the period restricted the role of women from gaining positions of power and influence in the community, even though many women received a higher education in the late Mennonite Commonwealth” (9). He also admits that “had it not been for the courage and strength of the mothers and grandmothers in the years of the Stalinist terror and especially during the ‘Great Trek’ in 1943, little of the Mennonite faith-heritage would have survived” (10). Do we simply recognize – and bemoan – the reality of leadership roles that excluded women during that time, or do we need to redefine our parameters so that significant women’s stories can also be recorded and celebrated?

Loewen wanted the writers of these profiles to include their subjects’ personal foibles and failings, to be critical and objective enough so that we don’t have only “perfect” leaders portrayed. Some writers did better at this than did others. Overall I found the stories quite fascinating. But I did miss reading about J.J. Thiessen and David Toews, the first two significant Mennonite leaders in my memory. While book-length biographies have recently been published on both men, I still wanted to see them acknowledged and profiled here.

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William Sloane Coffin. *Credo*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2004; Warren Goldstein. *William Sloane Coffin, Jr.: A Holy Impatience*. Yale University Press, 2004.

“True, we have to hate evil; else we’re sentimental. But if we hate evil more than we love the good, we become damn good haters, and of those the world already has too many. However deep, our anger, like that of Christ, must always and only measure our love” (*Credo*, 20). Not many are masters of the turn of the phrase, the one-liner, the memorable quote, like William Sloane Coffin. Coffin’s newest book, *Credo*, is a compilation of many of his most memorable lines from fifty years of ministry. Arranged topically, his quotes remind us that more is going on here than simply a quick wit; his wit is used in the service of something larger, the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is a wit that challenges and inspires us toward a more courageous witness.

Warren Goldstein’s biography of Coffin comes along at just the right time to be paired with *Credo*. Goldstein traces Coffin’s life from privileged birth in New York City to his retirement in Vermont in 1990 where he lives today at age 81. It includes his Yale education (like that of most of his ancestors), and his training to become an accomplished musician, his fluency in several languages, his years as a CIA case officer and then as a motorcycle riding seminarian back at Yale. Coffin became famous during his seventeen years as college chaplain at Yale for his activist ministry in the civil rights and anti-war movements from the late 1950s until the mid-’70s. In 1977 he became pastor of the most influential church in American Protestant liberalism, Riverside Church in New York City, and after ten years moved on to become president of SANE/Freeze, the largest disarmament organization in the US.

As a young minister, Coffin quickly learned the importance of being able to think on his feet and say something memorable. During Coffin’s years of riding buses during the Freedom Rides or going to jail for opposing the Vietnam War, Goldstein says that the press was attracted to him because of his energy, charm, and blue-blooded background. “You become quickly aware of the fact that the press and the country generally tend to value the sensational over the valuable,” Coffin remembered, “so you better cooperate gracefully with this and try to sensationalize what is valuable. And you better have that

message ready. You better have done your homework.” He learned that “when they stick that mike in your face you better know what it is you want to say” (127).

His approach in using language and the memorable phrase to get his message across is an indicator of his approach to ministry and the mission of the church in proclaiming the gospel in today’s world. For Coffin, whether it was the given question of a reporter or the social issue of the day, he saw it as an opportunity to show the relevance of Christianity in engaging the world. And given his personality he did it with courage, elan, passion, and wit.

Goldstein reports that early in his ministry at Yale, Coffin said, “There is a big need to present the relevance of Christianity to all major areas of life [and] to the campus as a whole.” But Goldstein points out that “he made no effort to hide Christian messages under secular rubrics, to sneak in discussion of ‘values’ or ‘meaning’ without identifying their religious source. A biblically grounded, liberal Protestant minister, Coffin enjoyed the role of evangelist and wanted the entire Yale chaplaincy to reflect that unapologetic thrust and engagement with the world” (105).

Looking back, we now know that in seeking to be relevant to the world, liberal Protestantism often became so relevant there was little of the gospel left. But Goldstein’s Coffin is a reminder that it was not always quite so. Coffin’s relevancy was salted with the Bible and the love of Jesus Christ. Even though he was often impatient with the church, throughout his ministry the church remained central and the pulpit was always where he was at his best.

In both Goldstein’s enjoyable biography and in his own *Credo*, Coffin challenges the church of today to out love the haters and to be bold in its witness of Jesus Christ. As he puts it, “Most of all, in these times that are neither safe nor sane, I love to see Christians risk maximum fidelity to Jesus Christ when they can expect minimal support from the prevailing culture. I have in mind what the prophet Nathan did to King David – he spoke truth to power” (*Credo*, 148). Perhaps for such a time as this have these two books come along.

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Ben C. Ollenburger and Gayle Gerber Koontz, eds. *A Mind Patient and Untamed: Assessing John Howard Yoder's Contributions to Theology, Ethics, and Peacemaking*. Telford, PA: Cascadia Press, 2004.

In March 2002, a group of scholars, church folk, and the curious gathered, under the auspices of the Believers Church Conference series, to assess John Howard Yoder's theological, ethical, and peacemaking legacy. As one of the participants, I was glad for the opportunity to re-visit some of the papers presented there. Considering these essays now in book form, I was struck by the fluidity of who this legacy is for and how it ought to be regarded. There is no clear consensus about the legacy we have inherited from Yoder.

One has only to look at this volume's table of contents to see that among Yoder's most immediate constituency (the Believers Church) there is a pleasing diversity of approaches to both affirmation and critique of his work. Something uniting the chapters is how they all seem to "take it to the next level": each writer wants to take Yoder along with them as they pursue their own intellectual and spiritual questions, believing they are indeed asking the right questions. Lest this comment be taken as an attempt to harmonize the diversity in this volume, let me quickly reassert that there is no lack of scholarly debate among Yoder's current interpreters, especially those included here.

For us Mennonites, academic conferences and gatherings are simply another way of doing and being church – a dynamic to which Stanley Hauerwas's caution in the introduction speaks, at least in part. Hauerwas writes, "the Mennonite character of this book could give the impression that Mennonites are more likely to understand Yoder than those outside that community. . . . Because Yoder is equally challenging to everyone, non-Mennonites should not let the Mennonite 'ownership' of Yoder deter them from reading this book" (12).

What this means is that we have a sense that our academic work is part of our corporate Christian witness as a church. The reverse is also true: for many of us in the academy, our scholarly work is as a noisy cymbal if it is disconnected from congregational life. This is why I find the essay by Gerald Biesecker-Mast, "The Radical Christological Rhetoric of Yoder," particularly helpful. He uses Yoder's own rhetoric and what we might call "method" to ask about the rhetorical force we employ in our own speech, and urges us to

take seriously Yoder's conviction that "the church . . . must in its very social and institutional character make visible the patience and nonviolence intrinsic to the witness given in Christ" (48). "God's speech performance in . . . Jesus Christ" has everything to do with the character of Christian witness (47).

Harry Huebner's essay, "The Christian Life as Gift and Patience," reminds us that Yoder's critique and ultimate rejection of liberation theology was based on its methodological and, I would add, rhetorical choice to "ignore nonviolence and divine agency" (36). This emphasizes the need for continuity in how we speak about God and practice the rituals and ordinances of Christ's church.

Biesecker-Mast's essay also creates space to voice a couple of persistent questions: (1) Why are so few women writing about Yoder from a feminist perspective? (Rachel Ressor-Taylor's "Yoder's Mischievous Contribution to Mennonite Views on Anselmian Atonement" is the sole representative of women's work with Yoder; however, she does not find much value in feminist-oriented readings and critiques of Anselm's theory.) (2) Why are so few men bringing feminist perspectives into conversation with Yoder in their own work?

The event occasioning these thoughtful essays took place ten years after a conference at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries concerning Mennonite peace theology and violence against women. At that time another collection of thoughtful essays wrestled with another persistent question: If we as pacifist Christians cannot make peace and live nonviolently in our own homes, what integrity does our peace witness have in the wider world? This question was raised again this past summer as part of the Mennonite Central Committee-sponsored Peace Theology Research Project. As a church, we continue struggling to offer an answer that has the theological weight Yoder taught us to demand of ourselves.

Surely, Yoder's legacy does not lead us to turn away from immediate and pressing questions of justice, a point made by Alain Epp-Weaver's piece comparing the work of Yoder and Edward Said, titled "On Exile," and Willard Swartley's examination of jubilee, titled "Smelting for Gold."

As we continue reflecting on who Yoder is for us as (a) church, should we consider how impatient he could be with those who had allowed their minds to become tamed by asking easy questions?

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David B. Greiser and Michael King, eds., *Anabaptist Preaching: A Conversation Between Pulpit, Pew and Bible*. Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2003.

Anabaptist Preaching may signal an era when children of the Radical Reformation are willing to engage in conversation and considered reflection on homiletics, the art and theology of preaching. David Greiser and Michael King, with sponsorship from the Institute for Preaching at Eastern Mennonite Seminary, offer here a collection of fourteen essays by North Americans from the Anabaptist tradition who preach and dare to write about it.

One theme running through their work is the Anabaptist sermon as a “conversation” between pulpit, pew, and Bible. Greiser introduces this three-way conversation with a thumbnail historical sketch of Anabaptist preaching. Key for him is the early practice of *Zeugnis*, or testimony. The preacher’s interpretation of the Bible was commented on immediately by the testimonies of fellow believers, thus creating conversation. Nancy R. Heisey continues this discussion. The metaphor of hermeneutic is often that of a bridge: we simply need to bring the freight of the gospel to our own era over the bridge that spans history and culture. Heisey suggests that reading the Bible looks less like a bridge and more like a dance where the Bible, the pew, and the pulpit, together with the Holy Spirit, join one another for the sake of the gospel. June Alliman Yoder gives practical advice on including the communal voice in the process of sermon preparation. Dennis Hollinger gets to the heart of this issue by looking at integrity on the part of the preacher and the congregation.

Another theme is the nature of the “postmodern” world. The complexities of preaching in a time when the authoritative place of the Bible, the church, the preacher, and faith itself appears undermined raises crucial questions. Michael King encourages the “weaving of enchantment” – an imaginative but truthful reading of the Bible – as a way to connect with postmodern hearers. With respect to the erosion of biblical authority and the increase in biblical illiteracy, Mary Shertz gives encouragement and strategies for reading the Bible. Nathan Showalter treats preaching in the context of the multicultural church, offering insights into how the gospel can be shared in it.

While the remaining essays treat the above issues in various ways, new topics and themes also emerge. Some attempt to push the Anabaptist

preacher into territory where he or she does not often venture. Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm encourages prophetic preaching, wisely differentiating between social justice preaching and Biblical prophetic preaching. David Stevens writes about the use of analogy when reading and preaching from the Old Testament. Mark Wenger offers practical suggestions for making theology and doctrine come alive in preaching. The theme of God's grace often gets missed in light of the strong Anabaptist belief in discipleship, an issue Ervin Stutzman explores historically and theologically. Rebecca Slough places the sermon in the context of worship, encouraging a stronger unity between worship and preaching.

Greiser and King bring up new, tantalizing questions. North American Anabaptists may indeed shy away from, for instance, preaching prophetically or doctrinally, or without proper emphasis on God's grace. But how do we know how contemporary Anabaptists preach, apart from local or anecdotal sources? Further study on the actual "state of the sermon" is needed. Is the often practiced "sermon discussion" in our churches a retrieval of the romanticized Anabaptist practice of *Zeugnis*, a child of postmodern egalitarian notions, or a bit of both?

The chapters in this volume range in style and tone, from Renee Sauder's autobiographical-reflective essay on narrative preaching to Lynn Jost's academic treatise on David Buttrick's method, but they all take the pulpit, the church, the Bible, and theological reflection seriously. These theological and very practical chapters and the study-guide at the back of the book make this a collection that begs to be read.

Reading lists for preaching classes in Anabaptist seminaries suggest we have been drawing our theologies and preaching methods from other traditions. However, *Anabaptist Preaching* bids to mark the beginning of an era when a distinctly Anabaptist voice might be heard. So, place this volume next to Craddock, Buttrick, Achtemeier or whatever other popular preaching manuals are on your bookshelf, and listen to the new conversation that develops.

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Robert A. Riall (trans.), Galen A. Peters (ed.). *The Earliest Hymns of the Ausbund: Some Beautiful Christian Songs Composed and Sung in the Prison at Passau. Published in 1564*. Pandora Press, 2003.

In his preface to this book, C. Arnold Snyder writes, “There is no reason why the hymn texts should not be considered primary sources on a par with Anabaptist pamphlets, letters, and prison confessions, and studied in that light.” He laments a historical lack of interest in the study of this sixteenth-century Anabaptist hymnal, and then points out that “Riall’s translation of the Passau hymns goes a good distance in remedying this situation” (10-11). This volume in the Anabaptist Texts in Translation series offers a great service in making this important material so attractively available.

Anabaptists and Mennonites have had a long history with singing. It is entirely appropriate that the contents and history of the Ausbund be more fully known, for both a knowledge of what our forebears sang and a wider understanding of the significance of song in the spread of a radical religious movement.

In his introduction to the translations, Robert Riall describes the colorful and long history of the Ausbund from its roots through its evolution. Of particular value is his articulation of what he calls the “Message” of the book (30-39). There are four points of certainty he explores as the editorial standard by which hymns were included there: Christ’s External and Internal Word, Holiness, Suffering, and Joy and Resignation. This is useful information applicable, I suspect, well beyond studies in hymnology.

The book is a compendium of translations, remarkably and clearly documented with footnotes, endnotes, Scriptural citations/allusions, and all manner of useful details. The cross-references are helpful to the reader who takes the time to pursue them. Riall, his editor, and the publisher have treated a hymnal that has been used continuously for nearly 450 years with the respect appropriate to an important historical document.

Holding this volume in my hands, perusing it to see what it contained, and imagining how it might be used, it seemed to me that it calls for a companion piece, requiring comparable time and attention to other aspects of the Ausbund. Apparently Riall has done some work with meters and rhyme schemes, but it is omitted here. It ought to be made accessible. Such a companion piece

should also explore the musical aspects of the hymnal with the same careful research. Some of this work has been done (cited in the endnote on p.12), but it may well be time for a new look at the hymnal's musical dimension.

Finally, I found myself wondering if it's time – perhaps already overdue – that someone (a poet/theologian) re-visit some of these texts and adapt them for modern usage. Our congregational song would be enriched by having available some of these themes that are as unique in modern Christianity as they were when the book first appeared. Perhaps in the garb of music from the time of the *Ausbund* or in newer musical attire, we could continue to give voice to those life-giving “beautiful Christian songs” that sustained prisoners and set them free. This is certainly no new idea, but one might hope that new energy turned loose by the appearance of Riall's volume will catch the imagination of those who make songs for us to sing.

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