

Foreword

The image of a “cup of cold water” is often used as a metaphor for acts of service or relief. The two cups of water held by Saleha Begum in the cover photo also suggest a dual act: she might be either giving or receiving that cup of cold water with both hands. Or, she might be offering one cup and receiving the other. That acts of service should carry some ambiguity about who receives and who gives, or that service in its ideal form is an engagement of equals, is suggested by several articles in this theme issue on “Theologies of Service.”

The first three articles were given as oral presentations at a May 2001 Women Doing Theology conference on the theme, *Embracing Hope: Envisioning an Inclusive Theology of Service*. The three authors, writing from different vantage points, offer varying perspectives on women and service. Mary T. Malone, who has explored the history of women in the early Christian church, argues that women’s service was considered as ‘natural’ as the rising and setting of the sun. Yet throughout history, there were women who did not accept definitions of female inferiority and who took service outside the hidden and private realm to engage in ‘charismatic moments of eschatological maximalism’.

Lydia Neufeld Harder, a Mennonite feminist theologian and biblical scholar, suggests that new images of service – a subversive song of hope – are required that move away from models of service as self-denying, as “giving away of one’s self.” Such models are troubling especially for women for whom service has come to mean “subsistence and submission or else duty and guilt.” Harder examines those biblical texts that have been used to justify relationships of dominance and exclusion in acts of service and offers a re-reading of scripture that introduces equality and mutual love into those relationships. Alix Lozano, a theologian who directs the Mennonite seminary in Colombia, writes from a societal context where multi-dimensional violence, poverty, and marginalization offer particular challenges to those struggling to live out service inclusively. She observes that the biblical ‘Jubilee’ is providing Christians in Colombia with a movement of “hope, struggle and popular utopia” against the current anti-jubilar (dis)order.

Two papers that were not part of the above conference fit well into this issue as they address other aspects of the overall theme. Mennonites spend a great deal of time *doing* service, but put considerably less effort into theorizing about it. Gerald W. Schlabach, a practitioner and theologian, found himself in “the belly of a paradox” as he reflected on his own service-work for Mennonite Central Committee alongside his compulsion to write about service theologically. Judy Zimmerman Herr and Robert Herr also balance praxis with theory in their examination of the relief and service mandate of Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). Using a postmodern framework, they suggest that the work of MCC must find particular narratives or stories within specific contexts, yet motivated by a more explicit ‘Mennonite social teaching’. The authors then summarize the implications for MCC’s current program. We hope to carry an overall response to these various ‘theologies’ of service in the next issue of *CGR*.

Mennonites have overwhelmingly thought of service in terms of acts towards and with other people. Attitudes and acts in regard to the natural world and the environment have figured much less prominently in models of service, if at all. While not intentionally included as a ‘theology of service’, Di Brandt’s poem sequence, “Dreamsongs for Eden” are a fitting link that may prompt readers to stretch their imaginations on this issue’s theme.

In the Responses section, we atypically include a response to a book review that appeared in the previous *CGR*. Recent books by two of the main contributors to this issue – Malone and Harder – are reviewed in the book review section, along with an eclectic assortment of others. As well, with this issue, I welcome Carol Lichti to the *The Conrad Grebel Review* team as circulation and office manager.

Marlene Epp, *Editor*

Cover photo: Mennonite Central Committee photo by Anita Fieguth