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Family and Community Ministries

empowering through faith

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Submit Faith in Action articles electronically to Michael Kelly at mkell17@luc.edu.

Submit first-person columns electronically to Jon_Singleton@baylor.edu.

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Throughout the journal are several opportunities for meditation and contemplation. We are especially interested in original poetry, hymns, artwork and short meditations. If you would like to submit your work for consideration in the journal, please send a hard copy as well as a digital copy to Michael D. Sciretti, Jr., 1824 Northcrest Dr., Waco, TX 76710, Michael_Sciretti@baylor.edu.

Books and resources review

This section offers our readers short synopses and commentary on books and other resources that may be beneficial, practical or enjoyable in their ministries. On a quarterly basis, we will send a list of products to those on our reviewer list for selection purposes. We ask that reviews be personal, informed and honest. For more information, contact Amy_Castello@baylor.edu.

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Family and Community Ministries: Empowering Through Faith is a journal for the heart, head and soul, committed to helping congregations and religiously affiliated organizations to be the hands and feet of God. Through the journal, the Center for Family and Community Ministries seeks to provide resources for family and community that foster creativity, promote critical thinking and inspire contemplation.



We are called to be genuine

Jon Singletary
Assistant Professor,
Editor, Director,
Center for Family and
Community Ministries



*“The place God calls
you to is the place where
your deep gladness and the
world’s deep hunger meet.”*

*Frederick Buechner,
Wishful Thinking*

Each year, I am invited to the meetings of the family ministry and children’s justice committees of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA. This year, for the first time, I decided to go and meet the family ministry leaders of several mainline denominations.

We met in New Orleans and toured Habitat for Humanity’s “Musicians’ Village” in the Ninth Ward. We discussed ways our churches are advocating for children, building healthy relationships and strengthening families in Louisiana and around the country. And, of course, we ate some of the finest food in the world (I grew up eating Cajun food so I do have some bias).

Leaders representing the United Methodist Church, Presbyterian Church (USA), United Church of Christ, American Baptists and others offered stories of exemplary congregational ministries. It was inspiring to hear church leaders relate the struggles of their own congregants to the experiences of our brothers and sisters in New Orleans. It was encouraging to hear stories of strength rising from the significant grief and loss of this community. At the same time, there was the recognition of many more needs.

We were convicted not to become the Priests and Levites of Jesus’s parable as we observed the men, women and children who have been robbed, stripped and beaten down. As we drove through the tattered Ninth Ward communities, we didn’t want to pass by on the other side but rather to stop and develop a sustained calming presence in the aftermath of a devastating storm. The good news, of grace for us and of hope for the people of the Gulf Coast, is that there are many Good Samaritans in their midst doing this work.

Congregations, religiously affiliated nonprofits and many other organizations have been moved with compassion and are offering genuine care. The redevelopment of housing and jobs begin to give testimony to that fact.

Nevertheless, there were other stories told of people sharing their pain and not being heard. We heard about pastoral and governmental leaders, and other professional caregivers, who sounded even more like the Priests and Levites, people called by God, yet ill-equipped and uncertain of how to respond to deep pain. Some of our hosts were skeptical as they asked us why we were there, but still there was hope in their eyes that our presence would be genuine.

As I hear about ministers who have visited New Orleans in recent months and as I reflect upon our responses when there, the words of Frederick Buechner in *Telling the Truth* come to mind. Although he uses masculine language in reference to the minister, I invite you to read it more inclusively; the call to respond in the midst of a storm is poignant:

“But let him take heart.... If he does not make real the human experience of what it is to cry into the storm and receive no answer, to be sick at heart and find no healing, then he becomes the only one there who seems not to have had that experience because more surely under their bonnets and shawls and jackets, under their Afros and ponytails, all the others there have had it whether they talk of it or not.”

And so we respond to the pain of our world, knowing we cannot do everything – that we are not called to everything. But knowing also that when and where God calls us, we are called to be genuine.

Buechner continues in such a way that demands a compassionate response from us:

“If the preacher does not speak of that and to that, then he becomes like the captain of a ship who is the only one aboard who either does not know that the waves are twenty feet high and the decks awash or will not face up to it so that anything else he tries to say by way of hope and comfort and empowering becomes suspect on the basis of that one crucial ignorance or disingenuousness or cowardice or reluctance to speak in love any truths but the ones that people love to hear.”

It is in this spirit that we present our Winter issue of *Family and Community Ministries*. With Buechner, these pages are a part of our adventure in “telling the truth.” **Andy Taylor** and **Michael Sherr** examine ways church leaders can offer positive pastoral support for returning veterans, particularly those experiencing combat-related Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. **David and Diana Garland** offer an excerpt from their book, *Flawed Families of the Bible: How God’s Grace Works through Imperfect Relationships*. They ask us to re-examine the story of Bathsheba and David as one of abuse of power but also as evidence that God hears the lament of people treated unjustly.

Michael Kelly provides two Faith in Action pieces, both the result of a vision resulting in community transformation. **Marge Nykaza** presents Hope, Harmony & Healing as a ministry that addresses social issues through the arts. In Kelly’s interview with **Sheila Mack**, we hear of Godly Women Reaching after Grace and Elegance, a ministry that challenges cultural stereotypes about young women who seek what God desires for their lives.

We also highlight the work of Fredericksburg Baptist Church in Virginia and its ministry among refugees from Burundi. This is yet another church that we are proud to celebrate as we learn about its sustained ministries with families in their community.

In all of these writings, as well as the poetry and prayers gathered by **Michael Sciretti** and the book reviews edited by **Amy Castello**, we hope you will hear our acknowledgement of genuine suffering that makes your ministries so relevant.

The transformational community ministries that we see in these pages begin with the recognition of deep pain. We cannot know the full extent of the pain of each person with whom we minister, we cannot experience every storm that blows through the lives of our congregation’s families and their communities, but we can respond from our own pain in such a way that allows God’s presence to be expressed.

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When veterans come home

This article examines biblical/theological perspectives related to veterans with combat-related Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). After a review of the basic symptoms of combat-related PTSD, the authors suggest that for some veterans, their bio/psycho/social symptoms could reveal a deeper existential crisis in which veterans are struggling to incorporate the experiences of combat with previous understandings of God, self, and others. The article concludes with specific suggestions to help clergy and church members offer positive support for returning veterans.

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Photos for this article were taken by Melissa Jackson, BSW student and a photojournalism minor at Baylor.

On the Sunday before the Fourth of July, Mark, a U.S. Marine returning from deployment to Iraq, walks into the sanctuary of the church where he has worshipped since childhood. He slides into a seat on the end of the pew in the back, far from the third-row seat he once occupied as an active member of the church's youth group. As people begin to crowd in, Mark starts feeling uncomfortable. Once very outgoing, Mark wonders why he is feeling so reserved and anxious around people he has known his whole life. He nearly jumps out of his skin when Mr. Timmerman, his seventh-grade Sunday school teacher, grabs him on the shoulder and welcomes him home. In Iraq, Mark learned that being alert could save lives. At home safely away from combat, however, he continues to anticipate and react as if danger were around every corner.

Because of the upcoming holiday, the service begins by recognizing the veterans in the congregation. Mark's name is called and he receives an enthusiastic round of applause. During the pastor's sermon, Mark's thoughts wander back to Iraq. He vividly recalls the Improvised Explosive Device (IED), or roadside bomb, attack that killed two of his friends and the fire fight in which he was forced to kill a teenage insurgent. He is certain that these and other memories will be with him for the rest of his life, and he fears that though he has left Iraq, he will never truly

be able to come home.

As he leaves the service, Mark reflects on the teachings of the day, and on his faith as a whole. He remembers a time before the war, when scriptures such as “All things work together for the good to those who love God” and “You shall not kill” were simple and comforting tenets of his personal faith. His experiences in combat, however, have altered how he sees the world. Now things seem chaotic and unmerciful. He has seen and done things that even make him question God’s presence. Although he respects members of the church and appreciates their recognition during the service, he wonders if they could explain or understand the violence he has witnessed and inflicted.

With troops returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, churches are likely to encounter a growing number of people with issues similar to Mark’s. Though they have survived combat, thousands of servicemen and women are faced with the difficult challenge of transitioning from an environment of instability and danger to the previous lives they lived in their communities and congregations. Some will successfully return to their former lives, beginning new chapters apart from the horrible experiences of war. For many others, however, the scarring effects of combat will continue in the form of PTSD. Along with the physical, social, and psychological effects of PTSD, some veterans could experience spiritual and existential crises that will challenge their previous understandings of the world. How will we, as clergy and laypersons, reach out to our fellow believers to offer holistic healing and an open mind as they seek to understand their experiences?

The purpose of this article is to explore biblical and theological perspectives related to the experience of PTSD. After a review of the basic symptoms of combat-related PTSD, the authors posit that for many veterans, their bio/psycho/social symptoms may reveal a deeper existential crisis in which veterans struggle to

incorporate the experience of combat with their previous understandings of God, self, and others. The article concludes with specific suggestions to help clergy and church members offer positive support for returning veterans.

BASIC INFORMATION ABOUT PTSD SYMPTOMS

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder occurs after a person experiences or witnesses an event (or events) which involves death or serious physical injury (or the threat of death or injury), a day-to-day reality in the lives of deployed military personnel (DSM-TR, 2000). People suffering with PTSD are often haunted by intrusive thoughts or nightmares that involve a distressing re-experiencing of traumatic events.

Normal stimuli, such as seeing discarded objects on the side of the road, could bring on upsetting recollections for Iraq veterans wounded in an IED attack (DSM-TR, 2000). PTSD is manifested in the avoidance of any stimulus that reminds people of the traumatic event. Furthermore, people with PTSD may have a persistent sense of hyper-arousal, leading to feelings of always being on guard and seeing danger around every corner (DSM-TR, 2000).

The symptoms of PTSD and the course of the disorder may vary from one veteran to another.

A heterogeneous cycle of severity and remission spanning several years after the traumatic experiences of combat can occur (Grieger, *et al.*, 2006; Owens, Baker, Kasckow, Ciesla, & Mohamed, 2005). On one hand, studies indicate that approximately one in eight wounded Iraq and Afghanistan veterans screened positive for PTSD in the months following their return from combat (Grieger, *et al.*, 2006). On the other hand, Koenen, Stellman, Stellman, & Sommer (2003) found an ebb and flow of symptoms in Vietnam veterans over 20 years. Furthermore, one study found that in some cases, veterans did not present with PTSD symptoms until 50 years after the trauma (Owens, *et al.*, 2005). It appears that while churches

How will we, as clergy and laypersons, reach out to our fellow believers to offer holistic healing and an open mind as they seek to understand their experiences?

should be aware of the effects of PTSD on the most recent combat veterans, fellow believers must be sensitive to the experiences of veterans of all generations.

Treatment

For many veterans, seeking treatment for PTSD may be the most difficult part of getting help. Already prone to avoidant behavior, veterans may shy away from treatment for fear of being seen as “crazy” or weak (Friedman, 2006). Once treatment is sought, however, several options are available. Evidence suggests antidepressant medication such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), cognitive-behavioral therapy, exposure therapy, and Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) can be effective in reducing adverse symptoms in veterans to differing degrees (McCrone, Knapp, & Cawkill, 2003; Monson, Schnurr, Stevens, & Guthrie, 2006; Russell, 2006). Apart from specific interventions from professional clinicians, social support, community involvement, and spirituality can help veterans improve their functioning and prevent them from experiencing adverse symptoms of PTSD (Friedman, 2006).

Combat-related PTSD

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder occurs in the general population as well as among combat veterans. Victims of sexual or physical abuse, violent crime, car accidents, and other serious negative life events are at risk for developing PTSD. Approximately 6.8% of the general population will experience PTSD some time during their life. Comparatively, the lifetime prevalence of PTSD among veterans is 27.3% (Slone, 2006). Furthermore, the traumatic experiences of veterans may differ from other populations in a significant way. Combat veterans experience PTSD as both victims and executors of traumatic events. In other words, many veterans bear the burden of attacking, maiming, and killing people in war. This aspect of their trauma further complicates issues of forgiveness and guilt related

to their experiences (Grossman, 1995; Singer, 2004; Witvliet, Phipps, Feldman, & Beckham, 2004).

Combat-related PTSD as existential crisis

Traumatic experiences can affect the spiritual well being of veterans. For example, when veterans were asked to write about their trauma, 80% framed their experiences using religious language (Exline, Smyth, Gregory, Hockemeyer, & Tulloch, 2005). The authors reported both positive and negative references to religion and spirituality related to the trauma. For example, positive religious references included believing that God provided deliverance from death or that trauma can strengthen a veteran’s spirituality. Negative references included a belief that

faith had a negative effect on coping with trauma, or feelings of unresolved anger toward God (Exline, *et al.*, 2005). Although several studies have identified the effects of PTSD on spirituality (and vice versa), more research is needed to understand the nature of the relationship between spiritual or religious beliefs and PTSD (Barton & LaPierre, 1999; Connor, Davidson, & Lee, 2003; Decker, 1995).

For present purposes, we will define spirituality as an individual’s foundational set of beliefs regarding the structure and order of the world and define religion as the specific development and expression of these foundational beliefs. Spirituality and religion, therefore, are both separate and interrelated, working together to allow persons to find purpose through the recognition of both the immanence and transcendence of the in the world (Barton & LaPierre, 1999; Connor, *et al.*, 2003; Decker, 1995).

A person’s spirituality, culture, relationships, personality, and individual experiences work together to form a distinct, but evolving worldview. As Smith (2004) states, “Cultural and religious values must be understood as separate constructs and as interaction variables that continually influence one another” (p. 238). Stated differently, discussion of religion and cul-

When veterans were asked to write about their trauma, 80% framed their experiences using religious language.

ture should occur together with other aspects of a person's identity. Smith goes on to suggest that even an elementary understanding of the world's religions demonstrates their holistic nature and intent. Each religion advocates a value system that is to influence interpersonal relationships, diet, finances, and sex, as well as transcendent views of death and the afterlife. No matter how pious, individuals reveal their religious/cultural worldview in a myriad of ways on a daily basis.

Given the interconnectedness of culture, religion, and worldview in the formation of personal identity, spirituality could be seen as a complex interaction between thought and action. While religious and spiritual experiences are deeply emotional for some, others may ultimately see spirituality as a construct of foundational cognitions. How people think about the purpose of life, the stability of the world, and the future are all parts of spirituality. When treating veterans with PTSD, clinicians often employ cognitive/behavioral therapy (CBT) to explore and eliminate erroneous beliefs, such as seeing the world as an imminently dangerous place (Friedman, 2006). CBT is effective largely because it encourages people to reconstruct the cognitive foundations that have been shaken and altered by traumatic experiences. For some veterans, a re-evaluation of foundational thoughts about the nature of God may be helpful in incorporating experienced trauma with previously held beliefs.

Prior to combat, it may have been easy for a veteran to see God as a being who is both omnipotent and all loving. People who see themselves as followers of God may trust that they will find safety when faced with danger. Trauma may lead them to believe that God has betrayed their trust (Smith, 2004). For instance, a person who once believed that "All things work together for the good of those who love God" (Romans 8:28*), may face a deep sense of disillusionment and abandonment. Traumatic experiences become tangible manifestations of evil in the world that God has failed to prevent. Personally recognizing, causing, and experienc-

ing true evil provides an enormous challenge for veterans who were taught to believe in a good, caring, and all-powerful God (Grant, 1999).

Many believe that God is a being who brings order from chaos. Belief that God created the world, bringing order out of nothingness, and setting forth values and ethics for people to live by, brings about an expectation that the world will remain a place of order. This belief in an ordered universe may create a sense of invulnerability and continuity that is shattered by traumatic events (Grant, 1999). In the face of such hardship, to make sense of the universe, veterans may rationally conclude that God can no longer be viewed as both all-powerful and completely loving and involved in the salvation of mankind. For veterans experiencing the chaotic horrors of war, the absence of God has



been experienced in the most extreme manner, and such simplistic views of God may no longer be possible.

Where soldiers once viewed God as the awesome and transcendent force active in the world, they may now see traumatic events as representative of the true order. The pain of trauma may lead to the belief that chaos and evil, not God, are the superlative forces in the world (Smith, 2004). Scripture and religious teachings are good theories, but not everyone is playing by these rules, and God has failed to bring about justice in the world. This view that life really is not fair holds sweeping impli-

*All scripture references are from NIV unless otherwise noted.

cations for personal identity, as well as issues of responsibility, guilt, and forgiveness (Smith, 2004).

Furthermore, soldiers may see themselves as responsible for traumatic experiences. Whether justified or not, when soldiers placed in primal, disordered situations feel that taking human life is necessary for survival, “an eye-for-an-eye and



a tooth-for-a-tooth way of assessing their own actions and the actions of others” (Singer, 2004, p. 378) can result in a devaluing of human life. Although this kill-or-be-killed mentality may be essential in war, soldiers returning to civilian life often must deal with the dehumanizing nature of their actions – actions diametrically opposed to their religious beliefs. Furthermore, some veterans may experience mixed emotions, i.e., feeling justified in their actions, while still sensing a great need for forgiveness (Singer, 2004).

Viewing the world now as evil, unsafe, and chaotic, veterans may feel anger, resentment, and even betrayal toward or from God. Individuals may feel guilt and shame because of the anger they feel toward God and thus believe themselves unworthy or incapable of seeking a restored relationship with the Divine (Smith, 2004). Traumatized veterans are placed at a crossroads with their previous views of God being incongruent with the chaotic reality they experienced in combat. Moreover, their minds and souls cannot accept the contradictory views of the world. Therefore, they will either accept one way of viewing the world over another, or they will begin the process of finding meaning and purpose in a world that is traumatizing and chaotic (Falsetti, Resick, & Davis, 2003; Smith, 2004) – a process that often leads to spiritual growth.

Despair or existential growth

For some veterans, the existential implications of trauma could lead to the destruction

of their previously held systems of faith, leading to feelings of hopelessness and despair. This destruction of personal faith is often caused by an “inflexible and even rigid ... mind-set about the possibilities of healing and growth in their spiritual selves” (Barton & LaPierre, 1999, p. 15). For these veterans, a black-or-white

view of spiritual matters results in a distancing from spirituality and religious expression. The inability to adapt their spiritual beliefs to include trauma leads to this abandonment of faith. These feelings are often characterized by a sense of abandonment by God, leading to negative religious coping and cynical attitudes toward religion/spirituality (Barton & LaPierre, 1999; Shaw, Joseph, & Linley, 2005; Smith, 2004). Instead of being strengthened by their faith, these veterans’ religion now becomes a detriment to coping with trauma and is associated with poorer quality of life, depression, and other psychological and physical symptoms (Smith, 2004).

The alternative to their despair is existential growth seen as positive religious coping and a more vital spirituality. Smith (2004) states that, “trauma can be understood as an essentially spiritual experience because it forces one to reexamine previously held values and world-views” (p. 234). Combat veterans have personally faced the temporary nature of the present world, and through their experiences they have the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of humankind’s connection with the eternal (Decker, 1995). Each major world religion, including Christianity, recognizes the role of suffering in strengthening one’s connection with the Divine (Shaw, *et al.*, 2005).

Many of the characters in the Bible praised for their great faith have stories of immense trauma and loss, developing their relationship with the Divine in the face of difficult circumstances and personal doubt. From the Book of

Job to the words of Jesus during his crucifixion (Matthew 27:46), the biblical text tells of its heroes expressing feelings of abandonment by and brokenness with God in the midst of traumatic events. For veterans such as Mark at the beginning of this article, reflecting on these biblical accounts may validate and normalize their unfamiliar, troubling feelings toward God. Furthermore, the perseverance of the biblical characters in these contexts may encourage Mark and others to move forward in their faith.

The extreme psychological and physical suffering faced by veterans may provide them an opportunity to reflect on matters of spirituality that were not accessible prior to trauma (Grant, 1999). Although trauma places the identity of an individual in a precarious position, it may be a vehicle for identifying personal strength and sources of spiritual vitality that many are unaware exist or are unable to fully appreciate (Lantz & Walsh, 2007). For veterans who are helped to confront this difficult spiritual journey, their renewed and matured faith may become a valuable strength to fellow believers.

Christian biblical and theological perspectives

As Christians, the search to formulate and understand one's own theology is often a lifelong quest that provides purpose and meaning. For the traumatized Christian, a re-examination of the nature of the Christian faith may be helpful.

At the center of the Christian faith are a number of paradoxical beliefs. Many tenets of Christianity such as "God is love" (1 John 4:8) are simple, though not always easily accepted, truths. Understanding God as three-in-one, or as both immanent and transcendent, however, involves holding two seemingly contradictory notions in dynamic tension. Having a faith that is formulaic and easily understood (as Christianity can be) can be comforting, but as demonstrated earlier, it can also be a source of great spiritual distress when the equation no longer adds up. In considering these dynamic tensions,

the goal is not to understand or solve them (libraries are filled with such endeavors), but to journey with the Divine in a process of faith seeking understanding. It is often a comforting step in the faith journey of a believer when he or she accepts that in this life, there will be aspects of God that remain a mystery.

As mentioned above, trauma often calls into question the goodness of God. Theodicy, or the problem of evil, is one of the most-debated dynamic tensions of the Christian faith. If God is both supremely good and omnipotent, then how can there be evil in the world? Even for the person who accepts that the Christian faith includes ideas that are paradoxical in nature, this is a hard concept to accept. For the traumatized person, however, who holds to formulaic notions of faith this idea can be devastating. When faced with an evil world, a person with a black-and-white faith may become convinced that either God is less good or that God is less powerful, both deeply disturbing concepts. To accept trauma, however, it may be beneficial for a Christian veteran to begin the often painful journey of seeing God as one who "governs the world in that he brings good

out of evil, whether partially in this life or fully in the eschatological new creation" (Ladd, 1993, p. 48).

Christian eschatology, or theology of the last things, is interpreted by many as the belief that God, through the return of Christ, will bring an end to evil in the world. No matter how this is envisioned by the individual believer, most Christians will agree that history is moving toward the ultimate goal of the complete rule of the Kingdom of God. Jesus proclaimed the in-break of the Kingdom of God, which may be understood as "that order of perfect peace, righteousness, justice, and love that God gives to the world." (Grenz, 1994, p. 22) Jesus taught the ethics of the new kingdom (i.e., Matthew 5-7) throughout his ministry, but the New Testament also teaches that what began in Christ has not yet been fully fulfilled. This "already/not yet" theology is key in understanding the continuing

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struggle between the values of the Kingdom of God and the presence of evil in the world. The Kingdom of God has already been instituted, but its promises have not yet been completely fulfilled. As the theologian, Stanley Grenz (1994) states:

The Kingdom of God is both present and future... . We can experience the Divine reign in a partial yet real sense prior to the great eschatological day... . In the meantime, the vision of that great future day provides both the motivation and the blueprint for Christian service (476-477).

Seeing the Kingdom of God as “already/not yet” may allow veterans coping with trauma to accept the goodness and presence of God, as well as the evil and chaotic realities of the present. Hope is provided in that the journey of salvation history will end with a realization of Kingdom ethics, where war is no longer a possibility.

The “already/not yet” dimension of Christianity also exists in the spiritual lives of individuals. Though a person may be committed to the principles of the Kingdom of God, aspects of his or her identity may remain connected to the evil/chaotic reality of the world. In Romans 7, Paul speaks of the struggle between the desire to do good notwithstanding the evil reality of one’s personal actions. Veterans who have killed in combat may have done so with deep intentions of doing good (saving the lives of fellow soldiers, defending freedom, etc.), but may also be faced with the guilt involved with taking a human life. Soldiers can take solace in the knowledge that believers throughout the ages have struggled with their own capacity to be involved in the imperfect aspects of this world despite their best intentions. Condoning killing or dismissing the veteran’s guilt may seem prudent, but it discourages the veteran from acknowledging the reality of evil in his/her own life (Barton & La Pierre, 1999). By recognizing that the veteran already accepts the ethics of God’s Kingdom, but they have not yet become a full reality, takes into account the continuing

transformation demonstrated in the Christian faith. In Mark’s case, he may allow himself to acknowledge the chaotic, unexplainable aspects of his life experiences while not forgetting the ways his spirituality has allowed him to find purpose and to live as a faithful, ethical believer. Though the symptoms of PTSD may sometimes seem overwhelming, he can work through them while holding on to the deeper realities of the Kingdom yet to come.

Another dynamic tension emerges when speaking of Christian conversion. Many believers are aware of a specific time and place when they chose to follow the teachings of Christ, and for them, this experience holds great meaning. Although this one event is significant for the individual, it is important to envision Christian conversion as a lifelong process of transformation. Believers are continually working out their salvation (Philippians 2:12), a journey in which the presence of God is sometimes imminent, but may sometimes feel distant and unknowable. While some Christians may hold the same beliefs for years, veterans with combat-related PTSD may be forced to face some difficult inconsistencies in their faith, a process of adapting and deepening their view of God in order to take the next step in their spiritual journey. Though

this experience may be painful, veterans can be encouraged to take comfort in trusting that these traumatic events are part of a lifelong process of transformation (Shaw, *et al.*, 2005). Understanding his faith as a journey with the Divine may help Mark accept that though his faith may never again be as simple as it was before the war, he is attempting to move toward a new, deeper spirituality.

If Christianity is a journey of transformation, it is never a walk taken alone. Each believer’s story has a unique place in the overall narrative of the church. The body of the church is intended to be an entity of diversity without division and of unity without uniformity. Paul describes the church by stating that, “in Christ we who are many form one body, and

Hope is provided in that the journey of salvation history will end with a realization of Kingdom ethics, where war is no longer a possibility.



each member belongs to all the others” (Romans 12:5). American culture places great emphasis on individual spirituality, but believers must not neglect the communal nature of the Christian faith. This means that members of the church help one another to appreciate their strengths and cope with their burdens together. Although the traumatic events of war may be a burden that only veterans will fully understand, fellow believers can be a source of encouragement and love by being available to listen, reflect, and struggle with veterans as they re-examine previously held beliefs and values that seem incongruent with their recent – or not so recent – experiences. Even though this process may be challenging for both veterans and fellow believers, a gracious, listening, and patient church community could prove a valuable resource for veterans as they attempt to work through difficult spiritual questions. Such a process may well prove beneficial to the spiritual maturation of both the veteran and his or her church community.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CLERGY AND THE LOCAL CHURCH

Become familiar with PTSD

Many churches find overt ways to honor veterans for their service and sacrifices, but becoming educated about PTSD and other issues facing veterans can result in an ongoing recognition that promotes understanding and overcome a negative stigma. Mark’s Sunday school teacher who recognizes Mark’s symptoms might privately encourage him to seek help. A group of Mark’s friends may choose to watch a comedy rather than a violent war movie, because they

understand that the images may be disturbing to their friend who is a combat veteran.

Most important, clergy who provide pastoral counseling to veterans should maintain a working relationship with appropriate mental health professionals, making referrals when necessary. While the spiritual issues surrounding combat-related PTSD are significant, ministers must not neglect the physiological and psychological symptoms of the disorder (Smith, 2004). A pastor with veterans in his or her congregation may contact a Veterans Administration social worker for information regarding available services for the congregants. When veterans tell a minister that they are overwhelmed with guilt about killing in combat and re-experience it in their minds continuously, the minister should recognize the intrusive thoughts as possible symptoms of a mental illness. The minister may discuss referral options with the veterans, and depending on the situation, continue to address spiritual issues related to PTSD as the veteran receives psychological care.

Reach out to veterans with acceptance and grace

Veterans suffering from PTSD may demonstrate avoidant behavior, meaning that they may not always be comfortable in large groups or in certain situations that trigger a re-experiencing of traumatic events. For that reason, even if some veterans wish to participate in worship, the social dynamics and noise may be anxiety-producing. Members of the congregation should make an effort to reach out to these persons, finding ways to include them in the body of the church. When veterans arrive home from

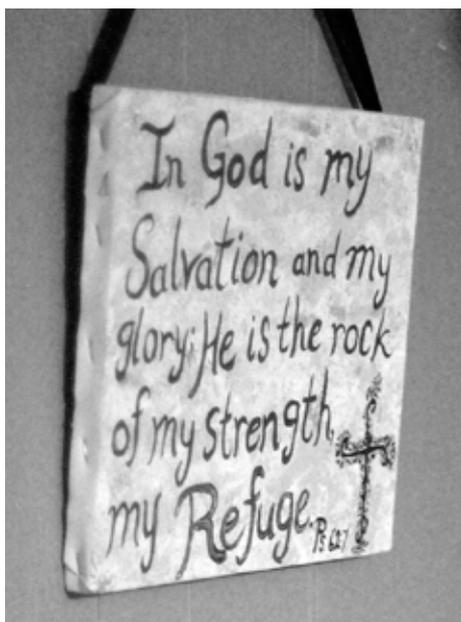
deployment, their transition can be eased by congregants offering to do simple tasks, such as cooking a meal or running an errand. These acts of kindness can show veterans and their families that the church understands that returning from combat is a difficult transition, and may allow veterans more freedom to participate in social/religious activities that will help them to reconnect to the congregation. As veterans choose to participate, churches should be a place of sanctuary, where they feel welcomed, but not pushed to act as “a well-behaved guest” (Bridgers, 2001, p. 74).

In the same way, veterans may find it difficult to fit into the mold of “regular” churchgoers, feeling that they cannot truly be themselves. As Decker (1995) suggests, “Survivors [of trauma] turn away from organized religion because it is not personalized” (p. 3). For these veterans, demonstrating grace and acceptance means allowing them to relate to God in a way that is true to their own spiritual journey. This includes allowing veterans to participate or not as they see fit without fear of judgment or being prodded. It also means providing veterans with safe, nonjudgmental opportunities to express feelings of anger or abandonment toward God.

If appropriate to the congregation, church leaders may consider establishing a Sunday School class or other support group specifically for veterans. The class could welcome veterans of all ages and from different periods of service. In Mark’s case, the ability to connect with other veterans may ease his transition back into the life of the church. He also may gain helpful insights from Vietnam, Korean, or World War II veterans who have had similar traumatic experiences in war. Likewise, these older veterans may finally have opportunity and a safe place to deal with their own war-time traumas. Awareness of and treatment for PTSD were not as readily available for many who fought in previous wars. Whether Mark meets with a formal group at a specified time or an informal group over coffee, he needs relationships with believers who can help him process his feelings, discuss his questions related to combat experiences, war, and his understanding of God.

Find opportunities for veterans to tell their stories

Veterans need access to people and places where it is safe to talk about the spiritual implications of their traumatic experiences. Clergy can use reflective listening skills to validate experiences and clarify underlying questions about faith. Even better, clergy can equip lay persons to provide support by teaching basic listening skills and educating the congregation on the



realities (and potential blessings) of having returning veterans who are struggling to integrate their faith with their experiences. As Paul implies in 1 Corinthians 3:2, veterans dealing with combat-related PTSD may be searching for a more mature faith and they need fellow believers who are ready to receive and provide solid food instead of milk. As veterans find new spiritual resolution, the rest of the church body is likely to benefit from their deepened insights.

As Mark reflects on his experiences, his pastor may ask him to keep a journal or find another way of chronicling the ways in which his faith has helped him through his difficult time of transition. As Mark finds new insight into his spirituality, he may be encouraged to share his insights with others in his faith community who find themselves facing similar trials.

Though nothing can explain away his experience of trauma, he may see good coming out of his reaction to the trauma through the strengthening of others' faith.

CONCLUSION

The church needs to gain a better understanding of the effects of combat-related PTSD on Christian spirituality. Future research should focus on religious involvement of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, examining engagement with a congregation, and include qualitative accounts of the effects of PTSD on personal theology. Research should examine the attitudes and responses of congregations to veterans with PTSD, including awareness of the disorder and willingness to reach out to veterans and their families. Spouses and children of returning veterans often feel as estranged and confused as their loved ones, and the church has great opportunity to be a source of comfort and encouragement to them as well.

Combat experience can create lifelong struggles for many of our veterans. Doctors and clinicians may provide help and healing in addressing the physical and psychological symptoms. Some of the deeper existential questions brought on by trauma, however, may be best addressed in the context of a listening and accepting congregation. If combat has shown veterans a picture of the world that is chaotic and hopeless, the church should be present in the lives of veterans as a counterweight to these experiences. As veterans attempt to move forward in their spiritual journeys, they should find the church a place of acceptance, peace, and healing.

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Widen the Circle

Albert Einstein

We are part of the whole which we call the universe, but it is an optical delusion of our mind that we think we are separate. This separateness is like a prison for us. Our job is to widen the circle of our compassion so we feel connected with all people and situations.

Source: Unknown



From Silence to Service

by Susan Muto

Flowing from contemplation and all that readies us for this gift is the life of dedicated, Christlike service. If service is insufficiently rooted in contemplative presence, it may lead to arrogance and activism out of touch with our original intention. We work to attain our own success with little consideration for what God may be asking of us.

Our projects need to be rooted in contemplation. In stillness, we can listen to God's directives and do our best to execute them gently but firmly in the given situation. Whether we succeed or fail is not the point. What counts for God is our willingness to try. Contemplation enables us to be serenely present in the world, doing what we can, without succumbing to the ways of the world. We remain rooted in the love of God while going forth in labors for the kingdom.

This rhythm of recollection and participation is an essential feature of Christian commitment. Whatever we happen to be doing – cooking a meal, writing a letter, teaching a class, nursing the sick – we do out of love for God and a desire to make this love manifest. We want to help others see his face in every person, event, and thing. This is what it means as Christians to be missioned. Missionary duty is not limited to evangelizing work in foreign lands. It is what we are to do every day in our homes and professions. Whether we are involved in teaching, law, nursing, medicine, or social work, whatever our position or profession, we have to remain faithful disciples despite daily pressures...

If Christianity is a religion of the word, read carefully and reflected upon, it is also an invitation to work hard for the betterment of the world. We must go into the desert with Jesus, knowing all the while that the test of our relationship will come when we walk with him on the dusty road. Our meeting with him in silence is but the beginning of a lifelong response to being missioned. As he tells us at the end of the Gospel of St. Mark, "Go out to the whole world; proclaim the Good News to all creation" (Mk. 16:16).

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A common thread

What started as just a skein of yarn became a bond that transcended cultural lines and language barriers for two families. To Dennis and Kristina Sacrey, it became a way to open a door, and to a refugee family from Burundi, Africa, it became a lifeline.

Refugee families from several conflict-torn African nations are being resettled in Northern Virginia. The “free cases,” those refugees coming to Virginia who have no relatives in the United States, are sent to Fredericksburg. By October, officials expected the number in Fredericksburg to be close to 200 men, women and children.

Fredericksburg Baptist Church is committed to be a place of welcome for these families and has established several opportunities for church members to assist them, including a conversational English program, childcare and meeting day-to-day needs.

“We have members from our church engaged in this every day,” said Jeanne Anderson, FBC’s minister with missions.

The Sacreys began to learn about some of the needs of the refugee families when Dennis, also a church administrator at FBC, noticed a common thread between some of the African women and his wife, Kristina.

“I discovered that many of the refugee women are knitters,” he said. “My wife is also a knitter, and she procures materials for them. We take them the supplies, and they knit together. That was our introduction to this part of the community, and from there we’ve formed strong relationships.”

As the women knitted side-by-side, Kristina began to better understand the kinds of needs the refugee families had. She and Dennis help in unexpected ways, like driving families to the grocery store so they won’t have to carry

Franci Rogers
freelance writer



Above: Barbara Louthan (left) an ESL teacher and Fredericksburg Baptist Church member, shares a moment with ESL class member Fathia Ali.

Photos provided by FBC.

packages on city buses or even explaining how to use a dishwasher.

Dennis noticed that one family he frequently took to the grocery store often purchased cans of tuna. It took him by surprise, then, when after several weeks, the family held up a can opener and asked him what it was. After he demonstrated, he asked how they had been opening the tuna cans.

“They had been using a huge butcher knife to jam into the can and pry it open,” Dennis said. “Another family had been using their stove as a vegetable bin. The local refugee center doesn’t have the time or resources [due to the rapidly growing number of arrivals] to educate them in day-to-day things. So we try to make ourselves available, so they have someone they know to ask for help. It empowers them to know how to do things for themselves.”

Anderson believes this is the most wonderful outcome of the program.

“Our members are so involved in really getting to know these new neighbors. They want to understand their needs,” she said. “Parents are helping parents, like explaining what a report card means. It fosters relationships.”

For the Sacreys, the relationship is everything.

“It wasn’t something that either of us was looking for,” said Dennis. “But something as simple as sharing a skein of yarn and knitting needles led to something so wonderful and amazing.”

While refugee resettlement is a new effort for FBC, community ministry is not. In fact, “a people on mission” is part of the 2,000-member church’s motto.

“For people who don’t want to sit still in their faith, this is a great place to be,” said Anderson.

One of the church’s longest-running ministries is Special Friends, which started in 1979. Because caring for their developmentally disabled children often prevented parents from participating in worship, the church began training volunteers to care for children with special needs. From there the ministry grew to include bringing the gospel message to developmentally disabled adults. Now, more than 40 mentally challenged adults attend

worship services, enjoy fellowship activities and minister alongside other members of FBC every week. There is also a Special Friends Bible Study, although some mentally challenged adults choose to join other study groups.

“I have one (challenged) young woman in the Companions in Christ class I lead,” said Anderson. “And I can tell you, she is the only one who does her homework regularly. She’s a joy.”

Out of the Special Friends ministry, the church developed two residential group homes for mentally challenged adults whose families could no longer care for them. Although it is not a requirement, many of the residents are members of FBC, and many church members volunteer at the homes, which are owned by FBC and operated through a partnership with the Virginia Baptist Children’s Home and Family Services.

That kind of partnership is key to community ministry in a church, according to Anderson. “The only way that things are sustainable,” she said, “is if you work in partnership with others.”

FBC has found willing partners in other Fredericksburg churches and organizations for their weekly community dinner. For five years, FBC has offered a meal every

Thursday night. The ministry began as a way to reach out to the homeless and hungry. Spaghetti, salad, bread, dessert and a beverage are provided free. As many as 300 to 400 people attend the dinners.

In addition to volunteers from FBC, scouting groups, sports teams, college groups, older adults and groups from other local churches volunteer to prepare and serve the meals, or simply to enjoy being together.

“An important part of the ministry is table fellowship,” said Anderson.

In that collaborative spirit, FBC has partnered with other Fredericksburg churches that want to host community dinners. “Many times, our church steps out in a leadership way,” said Anderson. “We want to be a model for other churches. So we help other local churches to replicate our community meal. Our dream is that there would be a free,

The only way
that [community
ministries] are
sustainable is if you
work in partnership
with others.

“WHAT A BLESSING IT IS TO BE WELCOMED AND TO BE WELCOMING.”



Doylene Wilkes (second from left), an ESL teacher and member of FBC, enjoys an outdoor fellowship with members of her ESL class.

community meal in a different Fredericksburg church every night of the week. And we're almost there!"

FBC also helps churches replicate its "Newcomer Blitz Welcome" for refugee families. Packets of information were sent to other area churches during the summer describing FBC's model of helping one Burundian refugee family set up housekeeping. It's a model that worked so well for FBC, they couldn't wait to share it, Anderson said.

The model began with the Sunday message from Pastor Larry Haun. He highlighted Luke 12: 13 – 21 (Jesus' parable of the rich man building bigger barns to keep all that he had accumulated). Then he asked those in attendance to consider that instead of building bigger barns, they might need bigger hearts for God and their neighbors. They were asked to contribute new or used items to a specific family of eight (mother, father, and six girls from infancy to 12 years of age) that was fleeing persecution in Africa.

After the two morning services, said Anderson, only 10 items on a six-page list remained. By the following Tuesday, every need was filled and duplicate items were being accepted for the next family.

"It begins with scripture," Anderson said. "Our pastor is a good storyteller. He gives us the 'this is what it means to you.' And then we make a request for what is needed."

This way everyone, from longtime members to the person attending for the first time, has an opportunity to participate.

"What a blessing it is to be welcomed and to be welcoming," she said. "We bring possibilities for interaction into our ministries. It's not just a program, it's an interaction."

Meaningful relationships are what people are seeking, Haun said.

"In today's world, people are looking for meaningful experiences that are connected to scripture." He cites the example of a youth group's recent activity.

"If he [the youth minister] arranged for the youth to go to a Baltimore Orioles baseball game, he might get 25 kids to sign up. But if he arranged a time to go do landscaping and yard work at the home of a refugee, 75 to 100 kids would show up. They want to do something meaningful that really connects to their faith story."

Haun's own involvement also informs his message. "I am involved in the missions, and so it becomes a natural part of how I interpret scripture, to tell the stories of what our ministries are and are becoming," he said.

As a congregation, FBC recognizes that its mission is ever-changing.

"Our gifts as a congregation change, and the needs of our community change," Haun said. "So you've got to talk about it. We could go back to

the old way of collecting our money and sending it away to missions in foreign countries, and saying how much we care. But that's not what we want."

What FBC wants is to be involved and it wants to build relationships.

"It is our community. The need is before us all of the time. It's here. It's us," Anderson said. "If you have your eyes open and heart ready, you see it. And that's sustainability."

And the benefits flow both ways.

"Our ministries are so nourishing to the people who participate, who do the helping," she said. "It

creates in you this humility and gratitude. Not just, 'God, thank you for what I have,' but, 'God, thank you for allowing me to be who I am so I can do this work for you.' It's humbling."



FIND OUT MORE ...

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www.fredericksburgbaptistchurch.org/

About Forgiveness

**It's offered freely, and we need only
Unclench our tight fists and
Open our hands and hearts wide
To receive the healing
Of our brokenness and old scars.**

**True compassion, peace, and deep joy
Await the recipient of the divine gift
That only Spirit bestows.
Yet Spirit gives only what it receives –
Forgiveness begets only itself.**

**Gateway to hope, and most
Sacred key to the Holy of Holies,
Forgiveness redeems our weary souls,
Absolves our painful guilt, and
Reveals fear's illusory source.**

**Humility, gratitude and love are genuine
Only in forgiveness' light.
Whatever is granted another
Is granted to oneself and God.
Truly forgive another, and all are forgiven.**

**As the bridge to God's spiritual kingdom,
Forgiveness liberates us from a world
Of madness and struggle created by
Anger, pride and blame.
It allows us to be who we are – Now.**

**Forgive
And be free
To love.**

– Skip Londos



Bathsheba's Story: Surviving Abuse and Loss

*This excerpt from *Flawed Families of the Bible: How God's Grace Works through Imperfect Relationships* looks again at the story of Bathsheba and David, exploring the dynamics of abuse of power, survival, and God's working through even the most troubled and troubling family dynamics (2 Samuel 11:1-4a*).*

Military exploits had garnered David great success. After a long struggle with Saul, David had finally become king, and now he could take it easy. The way the Bible states it leads the reader to think David may have grown soft and accustomed to the comforts of home rather than the rigors of battle: "In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him; they ravaged the Ammonites, and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem" (2 Samuel 11:1). The assumption behind this notice is that kings make war and they do so in the spring. David seemed to have lost his fighting edge. He was no longer the lion-hearted military adventurer of derring-do whose strong arm had vanquished Goliath and who had later presented King Saul with a string of Philistine foreskins as the bride price for Michal. David sent his troops off to do battle and stayed home, becoming an armchair general, lolling about on his roof enjoying the breeze, and, it seems, the scenery below. Spring is also the time when, proverbially, sexual passion rises.

From his rooftop vista, David spied a beautiful woman bathing. Artists and interpreters over the centuries have turned this particular woman into a painted sex kitten who bewitched a divinely chosen king. They accuse her of deliberately choosing to bathe in a place where she knew she could be seen by the king. They imagine her coquettishly parading around naked to catch the king's eye. As a consequence of this portrayal of the scene, David

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*Unless otherwise noted, all scripture
is taken from the New Revised Stan-
dard Version of the Bible, 1989.

Photos by Melissa Jackson

seems almost a helpless victim in the sights of a conniving vixen determined to seduce him. Since David is identified as a man after the Lord's "own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14), God's chosen one ("the Lord was with him," 1 Samuel 18:14), it is hard to imagine that he could sin without some tantalizing temptress making him do it. We need someone to blame for our hero's fall. Artists and movies have therefore contorted the biblical story, leading us to believe that David was dazzled by a gold-digging, bathing belle intent on arousing his desire so as to ensnare him.

The 1951 movie *David and Bathsheba* is such a portrayal. David, played by Gregory Peck, confesses to Bathsheba, played by Susan Hayward, how much he desires her. He scoffs at how stupid her husband Uriah is to prefer the stink of battle to the intoxicating perfume of his beautiful wife. He huffs, "He has no blood, no heart." Otherwise, David implies, Uriah would desire her as much as he does and would want to spend every moment he could with her – instead of only six days in the last seven months. David then warns Bathsheba that he would like to ravish her like a king who can take whatever he wants: "Be thankful that I'm not Pharaoh. At least I can console myself with the thought that your modesty matches your beauty."

Bathsheba responds coyly: "Perhaps you would prefer truth to modesty, sire. Before you went away, I used to watch you every evening as you walked on your terrace. Always at the same hour, always alone. Today I heard you had returned."

David: "And you knew that I . . ."

Bathsheba: "You'd be on your terrace tonight? Yes. I had heard that never had the king found a woman to please him. I dared to hope I might be that woman."

David: "Why are you telling me this now? Why not before?"

Bathsheba: "Because, first I had to know what was in your heart. If the law of Moses is to be broken, David, let us break it in full understanding of what we want from each other." (Gunn, 1996, p. 98).

Taking remarkable license with the story, the screen writers changed Bathsheba from the one who is ogled by David into David's stalker. She is the femme fatale who initiates things, knowing full well what she wants and what the consequences will be. She takes the role of Satan: "Let's break the law of Moses, and let's do it with gusto." The result of this portrayal is that David appears to be victimized by a cunning woman and is hardly responsible for what happened. Who wants to see Gregory Peck as a sexual predator? He is bewitched by an enchantress and betrayed by his own male virility and Uriah's lack of virility.

It is simply male fantasy to think that women are being seductive when they are in fact being exploited (Rutter, 1989, p. 69). It is not surprising, then, that the movie *David and Bathsheba*, written, directed and produced by males, makes

the cinematic Bathsheba conform to male fantasies about women. A steamy seductress enticing a king with her feminine charms sells movies, but the text does not support this reading. For example, it does not mention how she is bathing. She is not taking a bubble bath or lounging in a hot tub. The law required ritual washing at the conclusion of her menstrual period. A woman would be highly unlikely to conduct such a cleansing from her menstrual period as a come-on. If she were in public view, she would have washed without disrobing. There is no reason even to assume that she was naked. Public

nudity was not acceptable in this ancient Jewish culture but instead was considered shameful. There is no foundation for assuming she was some kind of exhibitionist.

Male-dominated cultures like Bathsheba's and our own teach women that they are responsible for men's lust. Women may think and may have been told that their behavior evokes this response in men – somehow they have telegraphed availability messages. As a consequence, when men lust after them, some women feel guilty. Somehow, they think they have caused the sexual harassment, the unwanted sexual come-ons or touching, or even the rape. Others may suggest to an abused woman that

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it was because of the way she dressed or carried herself or looked at a man – or maybe she should not have been where she was in the first place. Not only must women cope with what is done to them, but then they are blamed for causing the harassment or abuse. Bathsheba exemplifies how unjust it is to assign responsibility for male lust to the woman. Bathsheba had done nothing for which she should bear guilt; David had invaded her privacy.

David, not Bathsheba, is the subject of all the action described: He rises from bed, walks around, sees, sends, and inquires. Bathsheba was only the eroticized object of his lust and sexual fantasy. David did not even know who this beautiful woman was, suggesting that they have never met. The text identifies her. She was a person with a name, Bathsheba. She was someone's daughter, Eliam's, who, if he is the same Eliam who is mentioned in 2 Samuel 23:34, was a one of David's valiant warriors in a group known as "the Thirty" and the son of his close advisor Ahitophel (2 Samuel 16:23). She was someone's wife, Uriah's, who was off fighting David's war. None of this information deters David. He did not care about her as a person; to him, she was only a beautiful object to possess, another conquest. David was pleased to receive the kingdom of Israel as a gift from God. Now as the king, he takes whatever he pleases, including another man's wife. He looked down on her in more ways than one – literally from his rooftop vista above her, and from his position of power over her. The gaze of a powerful man packs power. E. Ann Kaplan remarks: ". . . men do not simply look; their gaze carries with it the power of action and of possession which is lacking in the female gaze. Women receive and return a gaze, but cannot act upon it" (Kaplan 1983, p. 31). Bathsheba had no opportunity to return David's first gaze. She did not even know that she was in David's sights. She was defenseless and clueless that she had become an object of a powerful man's gaze desire to possess. She was simply kindling that ignited the flames of his passion, not a person with a name and a family and a life of her own.

David was king; he had covenantal responsibility for the well-being of his people, including and perhaps especially Bathsheba, since her husband was off fighting David's war. One wonders if David's lustful gaze was accidental? Was it happenstance that he was on the roof at the time she was cleansing herself? Or, was he on the roof trolling, so to speak, for sexual conquests? The text does not tell us. The result of his gaze, however, is clear and disastrous. The look led to desire; desire to intent; intent to pursuit; and pursuit to deed. Bathsheba was the victim of a man with authority, the leader of his people, abusing his power – something akin to employer sexual harassment or clergy sexual abuse today (Garland, 2006).

David was violating his covenant responsibility as the God-ordained king of the nation.

Everyone wants to believe that they have the power to make decisions and act on them; no one wants to feel helpless or out of control of their lives. But when someone who has power over us and whom we trust is manipulating us, even our ability to sort out right from wrong is confused. Abusers play up the power differential, increasing their power and the victim's helplessness. David did not try to meet Bathsheba on

neutral ground, in at least some attempt to treat her as an equal. Quite the contrary, not only did he send for her rather than going to her himself, he increased his power over her even more by sending multiple messengers to fetch her (2 Samuel 11:4). It was a power move that could not be refused. She could not respond, "Oh, I'm not interested. Tell the king to forget it." She must have been so frightened by this summons; what could the king want from her? In thinking about this sudden request, the only reason for David to summons her that made any sense would be to tell her that her husband had been killed in battle. What else could it be? Refusal to answer David's summons was unthinkable. She had never met the king; he was known as the chosen of God; she would not have imagined that he was calling on her for sexual favors. Nothing could have prepared her for what was to come.

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**ABUSE OF
POWER: THE RAPE**

2 Samuel 11:4b

The description of Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11:3 as “Uriah’s wife” marks her as off limits even to a king. But, the next verse begins with a surprising “so.” “So,” David had her fetched to him. Presumably, David believed no one was off limits to him and that he could wield his power to have whatever and

whomever he wanted, even the wife of a neighbor, a loyal servant and his soldier fighting his war. Bathsheba had no reason not to trust David; he was the God-appointed king for whom her husband was risking his life. All Israel loved David, and he was known for “doing what was just and right for all his people” (2 Samuel 8:15). She was his subject, and she knew his sterling reputation as God’s appointed leader, a man purportedly just and righteous. She did not know about the vermin crawling around beneath the floorboards of his religious façade and reputation. She did not know that he was capable of stooping so low to trap and use her to satisfy his burning lusts. The setup was complete. By acquiescing to go with the king’s messengers, suddenly she found herself in a compromising position, alone with the king. Who would believe her should she accuse him of any wrongdoing? It was her word against his, and he was the great king. She was only a woman. There was no escape.

Most interpreters of this story have ignored the inherent power differential between a king and one of his female subjects, and this king was invested not only with political power but also spiritual power. The power differential between King David and Bathsheba was clear from an interchange between them at the end of David’s life. Bathsheba was again summoned into his presence, and she bowed and did obeisance to the king (1 Kings 1:16) and called him “my lord the king” (1 Kings 1:20). Later, in her last appearance before David, again she bowed with her face to the ground, did obei-



sance to the king, and said, “May my lord King David live forever!” (1 Kings 1:31). She had been by then his wife for many years, presumably his favorite wife. If she was this deferential after all these years of intimacy, imagine how she must have felt when she first was ushered into his presence. The saucy flirtation with David that the movies imagine and dramatize has no basis in the story.

David was in total control of the situation, even to the point that he may have twisted her into believing that she agreed to lay with him. He was a powerful manipulator. She must have been terribly anxious, to be fetched into the presence of the king with no idea what his agenda actually was. Anxiety would have heightened her confusion and emotions, whatever they were. Perhaps she was flattered by his attention. He was a handsome man; perhaps she found herself attracted to him. Even if she was flattered by the attention of the king, however, and even if she found him attractive, she was not responsible for what happened. Since consent was impossible, given her powerless position, David in essence raped her. Rape means to have sex against the will, without the consent, of another – and she did not have the power to consent. Even if there was no physical struggle, even if she gave in to him, it was rape. The narrator does not count it important enough even to comment on Bathsheba’s feelings, or whether she fought unsuccessfully to escape him. It is not important because regardless of what she felt or did or didn’t do, the narrator does not hold her responsible. David planned it, he used all of his power to manipulate

her into a situation impossible to escape, and he raped her. Then he sent her away. The encounter is only half a verse. In half a verse, her whole world changed.

“Then she returned to her house” (2 Samuel 11:4b, NRSV). What must she have felt like, pulling her clothing around her, walking out of his bed chamber, through the palace, and home? Did she pass the king’s servants, or the messengers who had brought her to the king? What did they say to her, or did they just stare at her? What knowing looks were cast behind her? Shame flamed on her face. Perhaps she was going over and over in her mind how she could have let this happen, blaming herself. Perhaps David had told her that he had watched her, implying that what happened was her own fault for not realizing she was in his view. She would be inclined to believe this powerful man, because there was no one else who could help her sort out what she had been through. How could she let this happen? A question that often helps women who have been abused by a man in power is, “Would this have happened if he were your neighbor and not your king/boss/pastor?” Almost always, the answer is “no.” No, because then she would have had her own power and ability to say no. Bathsheba lay with David not because she wanted to but because she could do nothing to stop him. If she realized her powerlessness, that too made her feel ashamed.

Sexual abuse is inherently shaming. Any time one person treats another as an object to be used to gratify needs rather than as an “Other,” worthy of respect, the user shames the one used (Horst, 1998). This shaming is accentuated when the abuser is a spiritual leader, as David was. Because he had redefined what was right based on his own needs as the God-appointed king, she may have been left questioning her own ability to distinguish right from wrong. David showed no remorse for what he had done. If this is king that does justice for all his people, then what was this? So she walked home, blamed and shamed. And that shame and blame has continued to be heaped on her throughout the centuries.

At a social gathering last winter, a woman who

works in a crisis pregnancy program with teenagers began talking to us about a Bible study curriculum that she has used with teenagers that has a title something like “Naughty Girls of the Bible.” “You know,” she said, “Women like Rahab and Bathsheba. Prostitutes and adulteresses.” When we suggested that perhaps the label “adulteress” does not fit Bathsheba, that Bathsheba was instead a victim of abuse of power, the woman was stunned. Then she began pondering out loud. “You are right; how could she say no to the king?” Then she said with some shock, “Why haven’t I ever thought about her in this way?” The response, of course, is that too often it is only men in power who read the Bible to us. Biblical scholars have identified a common

theme in the stories about struggles over kingly succession: “the woman who brings death” (Gunn, 1978, p. 43). That may be a literary theme, but in real life it is further victimizing the victim by blaming her rather than seeking justice for her. The woman has done nothing wrong except being beautiful and vulnerable. It is sin that brings death, and the sin is David’s.

Even if Bathsheba had not been someone’s wife, she was a person created in God’s image. When Jesus condemned sexual lust, he denied the right of the man to sexual freedom on the basis that the woman, whether

she is someone’s wife or not, is a person who is on the same level and possesses the same dignity as the man: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:27-28). Adulterous looks, Jesus made clear, are sins against her, not just against her husband.

The English translation here creates some problems. In Greek, the verb “to lust” and “to commit adultery” can take direct objects; they are actions done to another. English idiom requires that we render it “commits adultery with her.” The English idiom thus implies some complicity on the woman’s part when there is none. The woman is simply being lusted after. The Greek idiom more readily expresses the problem that Jesus was trying to correct. The man “lusts” her (direct object) and

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“adulterates” her. In other words, the lustful look dehumanizes the woman. She is reduced to an object for the male’s sexual gratification. Sexual sins are a self-centered exploitation of others. The verb “to lust” in Greek is the same verb form that is often translated “to covet.” In English, we can speak of a lust for power and lust for gold with the implicit idea of gaining possession of them. Sexual fantasizing sees the other person in a one-dimensional role as some “thing” that one can possess, use, and then discard. Indeed, this is what happened in David’s encounter with Bathsheba. He sent for her, had sex with her, and then sent her away. He used her and discarded her.

“Sending for” and “taking” are what kings do. When Abraham was sojourning in a foreign land, he feared for his life because of the beauty of his wife Sarah. Someone might kill him to get his hands on her, he selfishly worried. So, he passed off his wife as his sister. King Abimelech of Gerar did what kings do; he “sent and took Sarah” (Genesis 20:2). This rule of might is exactly what Samuel had forewarned would happen when Israel insisted on getting themselves a human king. These are the ways of a king, Samuel protested: He will reign over you, and then “he will take your sons . . . ; he will take your daughters . . . ; he will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards . . . ; he will take your male and female slaves . . . ; he will take one-tenth of your flocks. And when that happens and you cry out, the Lord will not answer you” (1 Samuel 8:11-19). In effect, Samuel warns, “You made your bed; you will have to lie in it.”

Unfortunately, it is a bed that women will have to lie in as well, and against their will. Bathsheba was the object of aggression. David had taken other wives for himself – including another man’s wife that he thought he had some right to because he had married her, even though he then abandoned her (Michal who had been married to Paltiel). He now took another man’s wife he knew was rightfully not his. The law echoes Samuel’s warning about the way with kings: “And he must not acquire many wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away; also silver and gold he must not acquire in great quantity for himself” (Deuteronomy 17:17, NRSV). David went beyond what Samuel feared would happen. He acquired a passel of wives including the wives of other men – three times, Abigail, Michal, and now, Bathsheba.

Bathsheba was sent for and was taken. This was no sexual affair. An affair assumes mutual consent, and there was no indication – or even possibility for – consent. She was in a position that rendered her powerless to give consent. The two did not see one another or have sex again until Uriah was dead and David took her as his wife. Clearly, their encounter violated Bathsheba in order to satisfy David’s lust. There was no relationship; he tossed her aside. How could she ever explain what had happened to her husband? In fact, she has never been allowed to explain what happened. She has no voice in the text to cry out her innocence, so that throughout the centuries she has been perceived as a guilty accomplice in sin. She has been seen as “committing adultery” with David. Her portrayal in the movies and popular imagination compounds the injustice of her rape by making her a seductress rather than a victim of the king’s abuse. She was beautiful and desirable to a lecherous monarch, but that does not make her an adulteress. She did not ask for this. The problem with sin is that it does not simply affect the one who commits it. The fallout spreads to innocent and guilty alike. Though guiltless, the victim suffers punishment. Had her husband Uriah lived to find out about it, he probably would have never been able look at her in the same way again, even if he tried to understand things from her perspective. She had been adulterated.

Perhaps, since David is a biblical hero, readers want to clear him of any unscrupulous behavior. As when pastors abuse their power, people want to turn a blind eye or make excuses for him. The rationalization is that David was going through a mid-life crisis. He had grown weary of the battles that marked his kingship and was leaving the fighting to others. All of his multiple marriages were unfulfilling. One can imagine him excusing himself: “My wives are so cold; they do not understand me;” or “The duties of my office are so heavy; I am a great man with great needs that need to be met if I am to continue to serve my people well.” The narrator of this story, however, drops enough clues to expose David’s sinfulness, though he had no intention of dealing with the issues that we are attending to in this chapter. The verbs describing what David did are telling: He saw, he sent, he took, and he lay.

The frightening aspect of this story is that David was known as a man after God’s own heart, a “good” man. Our world is full of such “good”

men. This is not just some ancient story; it is a story repeated over and over today. Abuse of power happens in schools, in the workplace, and in the church, when people have opportunity to use and abuse others because they have the power to do so and



there are no protective safeguards in place. Our families and our communities are home to those who have been victims of these “good” men who use the perception of their goodness to carelessly manipulate and abuse others. As we can see from Bathsheba’s story, expecting potential victims to “just say no” and stand up for themselves is not a realistic strategy for preventing leaders from abusing their power. Nor can we assume that it is only “bad people” who unleash evil in their lives and the lives of others. Perhaps even more dangerous are “good” men with unchecked power over others. Men like David. Who was to tell him no?

HIDING EVIL WITH EVIL

2 Samuel 11:5-27

The little detail that Bathsheba was purifying herself from her uncleanness, her menstrual period, (2 Samuel 11: 4) is a critical one for the story. Her bathing was part of her ritual cleansing from her menstruation (see Leviticus 15:19-24; McCarter, 1984, p. 286; Halpern, 2001, p. 35). It establishes David’s paternity for the baby that was now growing in her womb. She was not pregnant before David had sex with her. Her husband Uriah was still at the battlefield when she was impregnated. Only David can be the father of this child. David took her at the time in her cycle when she was most likely to become pregnant. There is no indication that David desired her to become his wife. Otherwise, why did he take such pains to try to get Uriah back home so that he could be assumed to be the father? Presumably, he wanted the marriage of Uriah and Bathsheba to continue. He just wanted to steal Uriah’s wife for a moment of pleasure for himself.

Bathsheba sent word to David, actually two words: “I’m pregnant!” This message is the only action she takes that is recorded in this episode. The narrator does not record her inflection, but one can bet it was not an exclamation of joy. Little did she know

that her words would seal her husband’s doom. She remained a naive victim. She could not have imagined what the king would do when he summoned her. She also could not have imagined what he would do when he heard these words. She was trapped and desperate.

David plotted alone, the face of evil becoming rapidly more sinister. He continued to wield power over Bathsheba, neither consulting nor comforting her, much less expressing any remorse at what he had done to her. He decided to call Uriah home from the front on the pretense of gathering information about how the battle was going and also giving a battle weary soldier a chance for some rest and relaxation – and to sleep in his own bed. He invited him, perhaps with a wink, to go home and “wash his feet,” a euphemism for sexual intercourse (2 Samuel 11:8). Then, when a baby arrived on the scene nine months later, no one would be the wiser.

David’s scheme failed. Uriah was too good for his own good. Uriah did not think or act the way David did, who appears to be driven by desire to do what he wanted without regard for the cost to others. Uriah of Gentile ancestry – identified seven times as a “Hittite” in case the dense reader might miss it the first time – had a sense of duty and honor that put king of Israel to shame. His loyalty to his comrades in arms foiled David’s plan. He refused to go home to the comfort of his own bed and wife, and declared: “The ark and Israel and Judah remain in booths; and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field; shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do such a thing” (2 Samuel 11:11, NRSV). No cajol-

ing on David's part would cause him to yield and break the unwritten code of solidarity with his band of brothers. Uriah would take cold showers and do pushups and would not go into his wife while his companions are slogging away in the front line trenches. In effect, he rejected the life that David was leading – enjoying all the comforts of home. Depriving himself of the comforts of home, however, is not the point. "Rather, intercourse would render him ritually unclean for combat" (Halpern, 2001, p. 36). Uriah's sense of propriety and his concern for ritual purity contrast with David's gross impropriety and moral impurity.

Tragically, Bathsheba sat home alone, in the crisis and shame of this unwanted pregnancy. Did she have anyone with whom she could share her anguish? Did she know that Uriah was even in town and did not come to her? Would she have told him what David had done? We do not know.

Rather than being put to shame by Uriah's show of honor, David pulled out Plan B from his play book of treachery and put it into action. He had to act quickly if he was going to prevent the gossips from fingering him as the possible father. He instructed General Joab to put Uriah in the front where the fighting would be fiercest and then to withdraw so that Uriah would be killed. Uriah would lead the charge while his fellow soldiers would slink away in retreat. So much for being repaid for his loyalty to his king and to his comrades.

Again, David used his royal power not to protect his subjects but to destroy them in order to accomplish his own self-centered ends. When Uriah was dead, he would marry Bathsheba to cover up the rape and resulting pregnancy. The cover-up came at high cost, but it made for a perfect crime that no one would discover, or so he thought. David had Uriah set up not because he wanted to marry Bathsheba but instead wanted to conceal the sordid truth behind her unexpected pregnancy. He was consumed by his desire not to lose public face, his legacy – the public persona that he was of upstanding moral character and a worthy king (2 Samuel 8:15). He would do anything to maintain this false

face. He was abusing his God-given power so that he could continue to look like a righteous man of God.

David's plan worked to perfection this time; Uriah died in battle a hero. David who wept over the deaths of his enemies, Saul (2 Samuel 1:11-27) and Abner (2 Samuel 3:31-39), shrugs off Uriah's death and the deaths of the others who died with him following the fateful orders that basically were a death warrant (2 Samuel 7:14-25). His cold-hearted reaction in 2 Samuel 11:25 may be paraphrased, "Oh well, such is a soldier's sad fate" or "Oh well, we all have to die sometime" (Arnold, 2003, p. 530).

Uriah's death symbolizes what commonly happens when women are abused by men in power. Their husbands also become victims, killing their marriage, killing them spiritually, and in Uriah's situation, resulting in outright death. If the violation becomes public, the shame can be so overwhelming

that it drives some to suicide or to violent revenge. Uriah never knew the evil done to him by the king he so faithfully served.

The war office notified David of Uriah's death. David told the messenger to tell General Joab, "Don't let this upset you. It's a war after all. Press on." Without remorse, he perceived his reputation to be more important than the life of a faithful servant. He was above it all, above morality, above the law of God. The uniformed soldiers duly notified the new widow that her worst fears had been realized; her husband had fallen in battle. "He

died bravely, his commander wanted you to know. We did all that we could to save him." The Bible tells us, "When the wife of Uriah heard that her husband was dead, she made lamentation for him" (2 Samuel 11:26, NRSV). It is the only mention of emotion in the whole chapter. Bathsheba grieved for what had been stolen from her, the man she had loved. Did David tell her what he had done, pointing out, perhaps, his ability to wield power over life and death, thinking she would be glad to have this opportunity to be his wife? We do not know. But she was not glad over Uriah's death; she grieved. Imagine how her grief would have been compounded if she learned that David had plotted

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the murder of her husband because of her pregnancy. Her inability to protect herself from David had now resulted in her husband's death.

In the Bible, laments call for God to hear, to see, and to intervene. In response to Bathsheba's lament, the Lord does see: "But the thing that David had done was evil in the sight of the LORD" (2 Samuel 11:27, NASB). There is no word here that Bathsheba had done anything to displease the Lord. She is not a co-conspirator. This deed was David's. He will not get away with it if God has anything to say about it. And God does!

GOD ANSWERS

BATHSHEBA'S LAMENT

2 Samuel 12:1-14

Prophets do not engage in cover-ups, and that is why the true story gets told, though not Bathsheba's side of it. Nathan, like an ancient Detective Columbo, somehow discovered David's evil deeds and is sent by God to come before the king and confront him (2 Samuel 11:27-12:15). He sought to catch David off guard and began by telling him of a horrible crime. It turns out that it is a parable, but David does not know that until he has fallen into Nathan's trap. It was a brilliant stratagem that exposed the king's guilt. For the first time, David could see in the clear light of God's perspective what he had done and what he had become.

"There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him." Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, "As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold,

because he did this thing, and because he had no pity."

Nathan said to David, "You are the man! Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: I anointed you king over Israel, and I rescued you from the hand of Saul; I gave you your master's house, and your master's wives into your bosom, and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added as much more. Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken

his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, for you have despised me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife. Thus says the LORD: I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this very sun. For you did it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun."

David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD." Nathan said to David, "Now the LORD has put away your sin; you shall not die. Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the LORD, the child that is born to you shall die" (NRSV).

True to Nathan's word, the Lord struck down the child that Bathsheba bore to David. Sin affects the guilty and innocent alike. The baby became very ill and died despite David's prayers. And the obituary column recording the names of other beloved children in his family would grow longer.

The story about a sheep was a pin prick in the hot air balloon of David's arrogance and covetousness. There was no hiding the evil now; it was out. The story underscored how precious Bathsheba was to Uriah. Note that in this parable, the little ewe lamb, like Bathsheba, was also a victim. It did not ask to be served up for dinner. Note also that Nathan never confronted Bathsheba or accused her of sin. Nathan said nothing about Bathsheba carrying any responsibility for what had happened;

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regardless of how she might have felt, she was not to blame.

The story of the lamb does not correspond with what David did at every point, making David's guilt even darker. Unlike the man in the parable of the ewe lamb, David was not offering anyone hospitality, and he took a wife, a human being, not a farm animal loved as a pet. A man with

many wives wanted another man's only wife. In the parable, the ewe lamb was slaughtered for dinner, but in real life story, Uriah was the one slaughtered in battle. Perhaps Bathsheba's soul was also devastated, like unto death. She lost the honorable husband who loved her, her child, her home, and everything about the life she had known, only to be placed in the king's harem. The poor farmer could perhaps be paid four times over for the lamb, but there was no restoring Uriah's life. And we are left uncertain whether Bathsheba's life could ever be restored as well. Even if she could have filed and won a sexual harassment lawsuit, no amount of money in the world would have been enough to undo what had been done to her.

David's violation of Bathsheba did more than destroy her marriage, her child, and life as she had known it, it unleashed a domino effect of evil. David called what he has done sin; "I have sinned against the Lord," he said to Nathan (2 Samuel 12:13). Nathan, however, calls what David had done "evil" (2 Samuel 12:9). It is a subtle but important difference. David discounted the evil he has done by calling it sin. "Sin" implies that abusive behavior is universal, "for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). We are all sinners, and using the language of sin normalizes and minimizes what David has done. But killing the body and soul of others in order to gratify one's own desires, however, is not universal. Although the potential for what David did may reside in all of us, not all of us are guilty of this kind of



evil. Only those with power can do evil of this magnitude. It is this kind of evil that Jesus spoke of when he said that those who caused little ones to stumble might as well have a millstone tied to their necks and be thrown into the sea (Matthew 18:6). For Jesus, causing those who are "little" and who have no power to lose their way is a grave evil worthy of

grim punishment, and it can only be committed by those who are the opposite of the "the little ones," those who possess power.

It becomes clear that although God could and did forgive David's sin, the evil David had unleashed continued to wreak death and destruction. An innocent baby suffered and died. Bathsheba stood by, again helpless and alone. David's grief was the focus of everyone's attention. Where was Bathsheba – weeping alone?

Where is God's grace for the victim in this story? What was done cannot be undone. Can God create anything good from the shambles David has made of his house, his family? David repents his sin but stays in power. If Psalm 51 is David's confession as it is identified in its heading, "A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba," his pleas to God for mercy are interesting:

*Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.*

He went on to cry out, "Before you and you alone have I sinned." David still seemed not to understand the enormity of what he had done to others. What about Bathsheba? What about Uriah? But his sin against them was his sin against God, and God offers forgiveness to the repentant and humbled David.

One wonders if Bathsheba ever forgave him if she ever learned the truth that David had plotted

her husband's death. If she had not heard it in the rumors flying around the court, perhaps it all came out when Nathan came to call. How did she feel being seized and brought to the household of the man who had violated her, and then losing the baby that resulted from the rape? David had other wives and children; presumably, this was her first and only child. The story is about David, however, and so Bathsheba's feelings are never revealed. We are never told how she felt about David or about God. Her silence matches her helplessness. We can only read between the lines to guess what they might have been. The text says that when the baby died, David gives comfort to her (2 Sam 12:34). His comfort would be laughable if it were not so tragic in its inadequacy. David has not distinguished himself in the accounts of his exploits as a compassionate man. To comfort her, it says, he goes in and lies with her. Whose comfort was this? Nevertheless, God is at work, and Solomon is conceived.

Bathsheba became David's chief royal wife. Solomon eventually became the heir to the throne, though he was not the eldest. He continued the house of David that otherwise would have collapsed, and Bathsheba too received special mention in the genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:6), though it was stated so baldly that it would have made David blush and her weep to see it: "David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife," the text reads. David was forgiven his sin, but that did not mean forgetting what he had done. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting, pretending not to remember what happened. The text refused to call her "the wife of David." She is recorded in the genealogy of the Messiah, the son of David, as "the wife of Uriah," reminding every reader of the whole story of how David had abused her and killed her husband.

There were complications and plots twists to the very end. Power struggles and court intrigue abound. In his old age, Abishag took Bathsheba's place as David's young and beautiful concubine and attendant, except that now David has lost his virility (1 Kings 1:1-4) and there was no Viagra in those days. If Bathsheba felt a twinge of jealousy, she

could take comfort that Abishag basically functioned as David's hot water bottle, simply there to warm his bed. The man who could not control his lusts now could not perform sexually. Abishag had access to David, but there was no danger that she would bear a rival heir to the throne.

David's son Adonijah, however, sought to usurp the throne from Solomon. Prompted by the prophet Nathan, Bathsheba took action to protect her son's future. She did not appear in the narrative until David was approaching death. She had become strangely empowered while David had become impotent. She maneuvered to get what the prophet Nathan assured her that God has in store for her son, Solomon.

Her last summons before the king presents a different scene from the first summons. King David commands: "Summon Bathsheba to me." So she came into the king's presence, and stood before the king" (1 Kings 1:28). There she insisted that David honor his promise to make Solomon his successor. In the end, Bathsheba as Queen Mother asserted her power. She had been stripped bare – literally and figuratively – by David. She had experienced a lifetime of grief. Where did the strength and grace to become a survivor come from, especially while living with the very man who had so mistreated her? How do any of us go on when it seems we have lost everything?

First, it is important to look at survival of grief and loss as the task of a lifetime. Overcoming abuse and grief does not happen overnight. Second, God answered her cry of lamentation. When Nathan came to David and told him the terrible parable of the ewe lamb, Bathsheba no longer had to suffer in silence and secrecy. Nathan was her advocate, confronting David openly with the evil he had done to her and to Uriah. Nathan recognized and spoke aloud what David had done. Before Nathan came on the scene, the only person who knew what Bathsheba had suffered was David himself, and he was undoubtedly not a very compassionate support for her. Now Bathsheba could openly grieve her losses. To whom did she confide? David's other wives? The servants? Her mother? We do not know. But the possibility for sharing in her family

Where did the
strength and grace
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mistreated her?

and community was now possible. Grief and loss carried in secrecy is too heavy for anyone. We need others to hear us when we cry.

Not only did Nathan make the evil done to her public so that she could begin to find her way through it, but he also cleared her of any responsibility for wrongdoing. If she had blamed herself for any of the evil that had befallen her family through David's actions, the prophet Nathan cleared her. It was David. And because of Nathan, David repented.

God answers our prayer in unexpected ways. At the time, it may feel like no answer at all. Bathsheba's lament to God was answered by the prophet Nathan. Because of Nathan, the evil was confronted, David repented, and with God's intervention, Bathsheba and David began a life together that gave Bathsheba purpose as the mother of Solomon, from whose line the Messiah would come.

No one expected her to forget what happened – not even the genealogist of Matthew. She was a woman of sorrows, of losses. We are all quilts of our experiences, sewn together in one fabric of our life. We cannot forget those experiences without forgetting who we are. But she does not deserve the blame and shame that have been visited on her for centuries. Instead, she deserves admiration as a survivor, a woman of strength and purpose.

In the end, it was David who must consent to her wishes: "As the Lord lives, who has saved my life from every adversity, as I swore to you by the Lord, the God of Israel, 'Your son Solomon shall succeed me as king, and he shall sit on my throne in my place,' so will I do this day" (1 Kings 1:30-31). Bathsheba bowed before her liege and said, "May my lord King David live forever!" But it will not be this King David who lives forever. It will be the Messiah, the Son of God.

No joyful wedding launched Bathsheba and David's family. Instead, they built a family on grief, on loss, on rape, on murder. It makes some of our families' craziness seem tame. Moreover, it was all so public. Gazing from roof that fateful day upon Bathsheba below, David thought he could sin in private. In the end, everyone in his world and since would know what David had done to Bathsheba, to Uriah, and the reason their infant died. Perhaps because it was public, they could face what they had done and move on. They could not hide from one

another, from their community, and especially from themselves. It is only when we can say "This is what we have done; this is what we have suffered" that we can begin to heal. We find that no sin is too big for God to forgive; no grief is too deep for God to comfort.

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A black and white photograph of a young child, likely a toddler, standing in a field of tall grass. The child is wearing a plaid dress over a short-sleeved shirt and a baseball cap. The child's right arm is extended forward, reaching out towards the horizon. The background is a soft-focus field of grass under a bright sky. A dark, curved shape at the top of the page suggests a page fold or a design element.

“Yes!”

“Jesus Christ was not ‘yes and no,’ but in him it was always ‘Yes.’ For in him every one of God’s promises is a ‘yes.’ For this reason, it is through him that we say the ‘Amen’ to the glory of God.”

2 Corinthians 1:19-20 (NRSV)

Yes” is the next step, rising to a new day, a fresh start. “Blessing” is another word for “yes.” So is “alleluia.” And saying “Amen.” Look up “yes” in the dictionary and you’ll see “adoption.” “Forgiveness.” “Baptism.” “A pat on the back.” “Lighting purple candles.”

Licking the bowl of chocolate frosting is a very small but very delicious taste of “yes.” Going the second mile is a big one; so is letting another person get the credit. Learning a new language is “Yes” with a capital “Y.” So is marriage. And attending the memorial service of someone who mattered deeply to you or to someone you love. “Yes” leaves the door open and the lights on.

You say “yes” when you plant winter lettuce, make good soup from Christmas dinner left-overs, recycle the tree, hang the thistle feeder for the finches, or eat black-eyed peas in the good tradition and promise of the new year.

You can clap your “yes” or sing it in a Christmas carol. Or give it away when you write a check to feed the hungry. “Yes” is rebuilding New Orleans, buying a goat for a family in Haiti, and supporting those who help in places we cannot go. “Yes” is Nobel Prizes for planting trees and micro-economics.

“Yes” pays attention. It stops to look and maybe take a picture when it’s astonished by the bare branches against the December sky. “Yes” shows up. It sees beyond today. “Yes” believes that the chemo is working. “Yes” is busy setting extra places at the table and writing birthday celebrations on next year’s calendar. “Yes” wants to enjoy every sandwich and dive into the deep end of the pool.

“Yes” mentors. It’s about believing in a high school student’s dreams. It writes letters of recommendation and sends invitations. “Yes” is all about leaving legacies and telling stories. “Yes” realizes you won’t get to do everything in your life, but, oh, how many you will!

When you start to cry when you hear, “It’s a boy!” or “It’s a girl!,” the tears are saying “yes.” When your heart skips a beat when all the candles are lit on Christmas Eve, that’s a “yes.” When a tree stuns you with its brilliant orange and all you can say is “oh, my!” you’re really saying “yes.” When you watch the Sand hill Cranes following their ancient migration route back home, you know that “Yes” is written into the whole fiber of the universe.

“Yes” is often a leap of faith. It’s what gets you up after you fall down. “Yes” drives as far as it can see with the headlights on then drives a little more. “This is not all there is,” whispers “Yes” when you’d be hard to convince that there’s more to life than you know right now. More than tears. More than Alzheimer’s. More than AIDS or war or loneliness or restlessness. “Yes” is more peace, more comfort, more light, more love, more hope.

“Yes” is wrapped in gratitude and overflowing in love. It’s committing fully to what your heart calls you to and giving priority to the One who matters.

“Yes” is the joy and fulfillment of Christmas. The light for the whole world on Epiphany and the grace of Lent. “Yes! Yes! Yes!” – a million times “Yes!” – resounds through the world on Easter.

But for today, like Mary, we kneel and allow ourselves to be open to God’s “yes” being born in us again this year.



Sharlunde Sledge
Associate Pastor,
Lakeshore Baptist Church,
Waco, Texas

Motivating marginalized groups

Michael Kelly
Assistant Professor, Loyola University,
Chicago School of Social Work



As Christians, we are called to do works of service “so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Ephesians 4: 12) in our churches and the larger society. This issue’s Faith in Action contributors have focused their ministries on reaching out to two distinct and often oppressed groups that are part of the body of Christ. These two groups, homeless families and African-American adolescent girls, are often relegated to the periphery of our society and only noticed when they do something negative. The two contributors to this issue, Marge Nykaza of Harmony, Hope and Healing (HHH) and Sheila Mack of Godly Young Women Reaching After Charm and Elegance (GRACE), have managed to find dynamic ways to inspire and motivate these marginalized groups.

Nykaza has been teaching the homeless how to find their voice and sing about their stories of struggle and recovery in churches and shelters around the Chicago area since 2000. Now her HHH ministry is reaching as far as France and Kenya, and her own voice is only growing stronger. Mack’s GRACE program also has been helping African-American girls find their voices, which too often are drowned out in the cacophony of gangster rap’s hyper-sexualized and violent noise. Since 1994, she has worked tirelessly to empower the young women at the Apostolic Church of God in Chicago. Now she is bringing her vision to other congregations that are eager to learn how she has successfully grown a teen ministry that has such strict rules and high expectations.

Reading Marge and Sheila’s words, I was reminded of the gospel hymn “His Eye is on the Sparrow.” This song is one that Marge and her HHH choir often sing in their performances, and the lyrics perfectly sum up both HHH’s and GRACE’s efforts to reach out to people who so often feel invisible in our society. By using their ministries to raise up the homeless and teens of their community, HHH and GRACE show that all of us, no matter how small and unimportant we feel, can sing as members of the body of Christ:

*“I sing because I’m happy
I sing because I’m free
His eye is on the sparrow,
and I know he watches me.”*

SHARE YOUR MINISTRY

Are you doing something powerful in your church ministry? Do you want to share your gifts? Submit an article to Faith in Action (1,500-2,000 words) to mkell17@luc.edu



Singing a different tune *by Marge Nykaza*

Marge Nykaza was inspired in 2000 by a class on women in inner city ministries that she took for her master's in pastoral studies. As part of her coursework, she met with the director of St. Martin de Porres House of Hope, a recovery shelter for 75 women and their children on the south side of Chicago. As they talked, the plans for what would become Hope, Harmony & Healing (HHH) began to take shape – a way for Nykaza's vision to use the musical arts as a means to address social justice issues.

As Cherisse stepped into the elevator, she immediately noticed the flyer: "Come join our choir!" At the time, she was recovering from drug addiction and living at Deborah's Place, a women's shelter in Chicago. But at the thought of singing again – a lifelong dream of hers – her heart lifted, and she knew this was a message for her.

That was in 2002, and now Cherisse Ellis serves as the music program coordinator for HHH, a nonprofit organization that provides a creative music program to offer dignity and spiritual healing to the homeless and underserved in the Chicago area.

Cherisse's journey has been difficult, as it is for most of the participants in HHH, but

despite suffering from cancer, diabetes and neuropathy, she continues on her path to recovery and does it while sharing her song and beautiful spirit. She has experienced personally that HHH is not just a music program, it's a way of living.

BEGINNING THE MINISTRY

We began the music program at St. Martin's during the summer of 2000 with a women's choir, a children's music class and a parent/child music class. During that time, I witnessed daily the healing power of music and song in the lives of so many of the women and children as they struggled to recover from the adverse effects of poverty, homelessness and addiction.

When the summer course ended, I knew in my heart that this was my work, and so I continued at St. Martin's as a volunteer. The shelter directors believed that the music classes were bolstering the residents' self-esteem, improving attitudes and creating a better environment, so they agreed to continue the music program, making it mandatory for

Photo: Cherisse Ellis as soloist with the HHH Choir and the Southside Community Choir in Chicago.

their residents.

At the same time, I began to network and seek funding opportunities to develop music programs at several other shelters and underserved community outreach programs. The connections came together, first with the Sisters of Mercy and the Agatha O'Brien Fund, which enabled me to start a program in 2001 at The Institute of Women Today. This organization included three ministries where I began the music program: the Maria Shelter, a transitional shelter for women and children; the Vincennes Senior Center for seniors in the Englewood community; and Casa Notre Dame, a long-term housing program for women and their children.

Then in 2002, with the help of a Norbertine Grant, I initiated a program at Marah's Transitional House at Deborah's Place, the women's shelter where I met Cherisse Ellis. Also that year, I began to volunteer for a short period of time at Sarah Circle, a drop-in center for homeless women. In December, I began to work with women and their children at The Mantle of Port Ministries, a community outreach program for families from Mexico and Guatemala.

PLANNING FOR SUSTAINABILITY

As I recognized the potential of this creative healing ministry, I knew that a more formal structure was needed to sustain it. I called upon seven friends and acquaintances that supported my work to become board members, an accountant and a lawyer. Harmony, Hope & Healing officially became a nonprofit organization in February 2003. At that time, we articulated our mission to be "providing a cre-



HHH founder Marge Nykaza (left) and music program coordinator Cherisse Ellis performing "His Eye is on the Sparrow."

ative music program offering dignity and spiritual healing to the homeless and underserved in the Chicago area."

As part of my networking efforts for HHH, I served as a music teacher at Epiphany School, a Catholic elementary school in an economically depressed area of Chicago, in 2003-04. The next year, HHH launched relationships with Higgins House of Cathedral Shelter, a men's halfway house, and The Courage Program, an outreach program

for pregnant teens and young mothers.

We currently have one full-time employee (myself) and five part-time employees, who include an administrative assistant, music program coordinator, and three music program assistants (former participants who are choir soloists and help facilitate various activities). We also have a Hispanic music coordinator/consultant, an accompanist and four professional consultants who include a development/grant writer, an accountant, a lawyer and a computer support person.

THE MINISTRY TODAY

We now provide a combination of five music classes and choir rehearsals at six different sites in the Chicago area. These include parent/child classes, making music classes, musical English lessons (ESL), children's classes and senior group piano lessons.

The HHH curriculum has developed to include musical, educational, therapeutic, spiritual, creative and performance components and is offered in four 10-week sessions per year, with the exception of the Courage

Program, which meets once a month. Each activity is conducted in a circle and meets from 50 minutes to an hour and a half. Sessions include breathing and vocal exercises, songs, body movement and topics that support the HHH mission and goals.

One of our most popular and high-profile programs is the HHH Choir, which performs gospel and inspirational music two to three times a month at various church services and events. Some of our singing engagements in the past year have included the Greater Chicago Food Depository's Hunger Walk, Chicago's Prayer Leadership Breakfast, Cabrini Green Legal Aid Benefit and Looptopia.

In addition to our weekly programs and choir performance, HHH has built local and international relationships. We participate with high school students involved in Peace-builders Projects at Catholic Theological Union, Chicago, and college students from the University of Avignon, France, in a group called Planters of Hope. We also have begun a relationship with a school and church choir in Nairobi, Kenya, through our friendship with Grace Mwele. Grace became familiar with HHH through a resident at Deborah's Place when she was visiting the States in 2003. I had the opportunity to visit Grace in 2005 and in 2007 when we were asked by Global Alliance for Africa (GAA) to team teach at an art camp in Arusha, Tanzania. We are planning to return to Arusha in July 2008. Recently, the HHH board of directors decided to begin an official African Outreach, which will include collaborating with GAA to begin a music program in Kabera, the largest slum in Africa. Our hope is that Grace will lead this program.

OUR VOLUNTEERS

We are able to run a successful and far-reaching program because we are blessed with the ever-growing support of a community that believes in and is committed to our mission. With more than 100 volunteers, we are grateful that so many people and organizations are willing to share their time, talent and treasure with us. There is no standard length of commitment for volunteers, although most stay involved in a variety of ways, including singing in the choir, facilitating activities, hosting a choir performance, donating musical instruments, helping with publicity and newsletters, taking photos and videos, baby sitting children during performances, being a guest artist, and the list goes on. We hope to formalize a volunteer training program in 2008.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

As a nonprofit organization, HHH depends on in-kind services, individual contributions, corporate and foundation support, grants, and contractual services revenue.

Various fundraising efforts include a biannual newsletter, an annual appeal letter, performances and special events. We are grateful to a community of generous friends, foundations and agencies we serve that have supported us from the beginning. They have grown to trust and believe in our mission.

CHALLENGES AND REWARDS

The journey of establishing and operating any nonprofit organization can be difficult. There are concerns about funding sources, quantifying the work for grants, stabilizing programs

GOALS OF HARMONY, HOPE & HEALING

- Use music as a healing tool and a vehicle to enhance life skills while improving overall quality of life;
- Integrate music into daily life experiences;
- Provide opportunities to experience healing and spirituality through music;
- Build self-esteem and confidence;
- Enable the learning process through music;
- Offer a safe place to uncover and/or discover participant's own authentic voice; and
- Provide experiences that invite participants to sense beauty and harmony within themselves and in the world around them.

at various sites, and workload, just to name a few. Despite this and moments of doubt along the way, I can truly say this work is awesome! To the best of our ability, we provide a creative healing and recovery ministry to help individuals impacted by poverty, homelessness, domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and aging. HHH also bridges language gaps while enabling participants to use their authentic voices.

PROVIDING A MODEL

When I first started HHH, I dreamed of having sites all over the city and the country. Right now, I believe we best serve by growing internally, laying a solid foundation and providing a model for others to emulate. Here



FIND OUT MORE ...

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SITES WE SERVE:

- St. Martin de Porres House of Hope
www.StMartindePorresHouseofHope.com
- The Courage Program
www.courageprogram.org
- Maria Shelter and The Vincennes Senior Center of The Institute of Women Today
www.instituteofwomentoday.org
- The Mantle of Port Ministries
www.theportministries.org
- Higgins House of Cathedral Shelter
www.cathedralshelter.org

RESOURCES:

- Training in Cross-Cultural Healing Music: Open Ear Center
www.openearcenter.com
- Resource for using music to enhance life and heal: Don Campbell and the Mozart Effect - www.mozarteffect.com/
- Parent/ Child Music Class Information: Music Together - www.musictogether.com

are some of our core principles of performance and ministry:

- Recognize that the arts can be used to address social justice issues.
- Be faithful to the work and keep its commitments. (*The participants of HHH do not ask about my credentials and what degrees I have. They say, "This [music program] makes me feel good" and "Will you be here next week?" They ask me to be faithful!*)
- Build relationships with the agencies we serve.
- Listen with an open mind, heart and ear to those we serve.
- Let music and singing accompany the journey.
- Lead with love!

In February 2008, HHH will celebrate its fifth anniversary as a nonprofit. In the past year, we have impacted more than 5,000 people through various venues, including weekly sessions, performances and special events. With God's help and the faithful support of many, HHH will continue to grow as a strong, viable and creative healing tool for the homeless and underserved in Chicago.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

- ⇒ What artistic gifts do you and your church have that might serve and empower the homeless and disadvantaged in your community?
- ⇒ Of the six goals HHH lists, which would be most difficult for your church to carry out? Which is your church already doing?

As a professional singer, pastoral musician and educator, Marge shares her gift and love of music with many communities throughout the Chicago area and abroad. She has a Bachelor of Music with teaching certificate from Eastern Illinois University, advanced vocal training at DePaul University and a Masters in Pastoral Studies from Loyola University, Chicago. Marge has been studying Therapeutic Application of Cross-Cultural Healing Music in Health care and Education at the Open Ear Center in Seattle, WA, and is certified as a Cross-Cultural Music Healing Practitioner.





Young women full of GRACE *interview with Sheila Mack*

Sheila Mack is the director of Godly Young Women Reaching After Grace and Elegance (GRACE) ministries at the Apostolic Church of God in Chicago. The ministry began in 1994 and now has an average yearly attendance of 40 to 50 teenage girls who meet one Saturday a month for nine months during the academic year. GRACE has about 45 volunteers, all women and most from the business or corporate world. The group's guiding mission is based on Titus 2:3-5.

MICHAEL KELLY: Share with us how the idea for GRACE ministries began.

SHEILA MACK: Fourteen years ago I was getting frustrated with how teenage girls and women were portrayed in what was considered the 'hip-hop culture.' I began to observe the music/rap artists and how they dressed and talked and how some of our teen girls within and outside of the church wanted to emulate them. I went to a sorority sister (Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.) of mine at our church and said to her, 'I think it's time for us to start a program for teenage girls.'

There were so many women in the church who had college degrees and were in the corporate sector and could actually direct these young girls into selecting a good career and provide them with godly direction for their lives.

Q: What was the response of your church when you presented the proposal?

A: We went to Bishop Arthur M. Brazier and presented him a proposal, and he was really in sync with us. He shared his desire to expand the church activities for our teenage girls. So along with six other women from my sorority, who also attended our church, we founded the GRACE ministry.



Photos provided by Sheila Mack. Young women in the program participate in a culminating event at the end of the year (above and right).

Q: What are the goals of GRACE, and how was the ministry received?

A: We started off with eight teen girls and focused on increasing their self-esteem and self-image and establishing high moral and ethical standards for them to follow. We wanted also to emphasize the importance of femininity and what it meant to be a woman of God. We are still focusing on these things. The girls in our group were ages 11 to 18 when we started in 1994. We've now focused our attention on teen girls between the ages of 13 to 17 (high school seniors,) and we have a culminating ceremony at the end of each GRACE program year. We highlight the talents and gifts of our girls and spotlight our graduating seniors.

Today, we have about 45 volunteers and 40 to 50 girls in the GRACE program each year. On average, two-thirds of the girls make it through the entire year to participate in the culminating event. We are ministering, teaching and mentoring to these girls for nine months, one Saturday a month.

Q: What are the expectations of the young women involved in GRACE?

A: At the beginning of the GRACE Program Year, I tell our girls, 'My challenge to each of you is to stick this out, no matter how tough it gets, no matter how tough the standards are. God has a plan for you and this program will transform you. The world doesn't owe you anything. The world isn't going to give you what we're giving you. This will be a safe environment for you to be yourself, but you will be taught to be your best. Outside these walls it is a cold world. You are blessed that our God has sent so many incredible women to pour



Poise, presentation and appropriate dress are some of the characteristics and expectations of the GRACE program.

into their lives.' I tell them that the GRACE leaders are nothing but God's vessels, made in the image of God, and so are they.

Q: How do you recruit for the program?

A: Every year we recruit and we use a lot of creativity to invite teen girls into our ministry. We have teen girls in the program who recruit their friends, we pass out brochures, we attend other youth ministry events in the church. However, a lot of our recruitment comes from our pastor, who every year makes

an announcement from the pulpit as we're getting started. He makes it very clear to our church's mothers and fathers that they are to place their teenage daughters in GRACE if they want their daughters to become women of God and learn how to respect themselves and be visible in the church as young women of God. Because of our pastor's support, we've never had a problem recruiting.

Q: What does the programming look like for the participants?

A: We provide a wide range of activities and services that gives them what they are looking for in a youth group. The girls are very open with us. As the volunteers, we design, develop and deliver workshops on a variety of topics such as abstinence, salvation, personal hygiene, your relationship with God, etc. We conduct small group sessions that are led by adult female GRACE volunteers (who are addressed as 'Sister.' I am 'Sister Sheila' to our girls). These volunteers are able to create a safe space through the use of scripture and various learning activities (i.e. role plays, skits, reflective exercises, etc.) to reinforce that

these girls are fearfully and wonderfully made as stated in the Bible in Psalms 139:14.

Q: What have been some of the challenges in your ministry?

A: Some of the challenges in our ministry include trying to instill in some of the girls the need for them to adopt a style of Christian attire. When GRACE meets, we all dress in skirts and dresses, and that just isn't the way our society is anymore. We address this challenge by holding an orientation for students and parents where we talk about expectations and rules, including the attire. Parents are given an agreement to sign so that they understand what we will be doing throughout the year. We have the calendar for the year, with meetings every month. At the GRACE Ministry, we are very structured, and I bring my experience from corporate America to the ministry and make sure that we are all clear about our mission, vision and direction from God.

Another thing that we see is that some girls struggle to be leaders initially, as they may not have any prior leadership experiences in their lives (at school or at home). Our biggest challenge is that we have difficulty monitoring what happens outside of GRACE. Even though their parents sign our agreement, when our girls go to school, we have no control over how they dress or behave. We ask parents to help us instill the values of femininity and GRACE, but if parents aren't willing to handle this responsibility, we can only control what happens at our GRACE meetings and events. We emphasize respect, for ourselves and for each other.

Q: Can you recall a specific occasion in GRACE that challenged you personally or expanded your own faith?

A: I recently had a young woman in GRACE who was absolutely a leader but was modeling negative behavior by talking back to our volunteers and leaders and being disruptive during the workshop sessions. I was ready to kick this girl out

of GRACE based on my observations and the feedback from the volunteers. I set up a meeting with this girl and her mother, and while driving to meet with them the Holy Spirit said to me, 'You can't do this to this child.' And the whole time I'm driving, I'm having a battle with God. I didn't know what I was going to do. I knew what I wanted to do and what the other GRACE volunteers wanted me to do, but God had another plan and spoke something different into me. I met with this girl and her mother and found myself

saying, 'This has to stop. You are a great leader and I believe that God wants you to use your leadership skills in a positive manner.' I also told the teen girl how I truly loved and cared about her, and that I believed she could change.

Let me tell you what this young woman has done: She has never misbehaved since, and she has earned her nursing license and she's working and happy. In addition, this girl is respecting the GRACE volunteers and

leaders. Everyone in the GRACE Ministry is astonished at how God has truly transformed this girl.

My motto is that we don't give up on our teen girls because God did not give up on us. Because of how this girl has changed her approach and disposition, I bought her a gift to show her how proud I am of her, and every time I see her now I smile and tell her that again. In addition, I regularly go up to her and tell her how beautiful she is and how I knew she could do it. At our culminating event this year, her mother blessed the GRACE Ministry with a financial contribution, and here I was, feeling ready to give up on that child, but God had a plan!

I tell my volunteers,
see yourself in that
child and you will not
forget how important
it is to work humbly
and lovingly
with them.

Q: How do you sustain your energy and enthusiasm for this ministry?

A: I never knew what people meant when they said ‘find your passion.’ I realized recently that I was called by God to this ministry. Yes, I was supposed to get my college degrees and to work in corporate America, travel the world with my work, but ultimately my calling related to having an impact on the lives of teen girls. My heart is in this. For God has said that it is the responsibility of the older women to oversee the lives of teen age girls, and we follow Titus 2: 3-5 closely when God calls for us to train our younger women.

I have to watch myself so I don’t get too emotional sometimes ... I sometimes see more in my girls than they see in themselves. I see me in them, how when I was a teenager God transformed my life. I tell my volunteers, see yourself in that child and you will not forget how important it is to work humbly and lovingly with them.

Q: How do you recruit volunteers? You have almost 50 a year, you said.

A: We tend to have women who are professionals who gravitate to the GRACE ministry. We have women who are medical doctors, managers in corporate America, women who own businesses. We organize our ministry to give services to these teen girls and to make sure that all of us are able to give the most attention possible to them – it’s all about giving to them.

We work with these girls from a variety of angles – Christian living, societal issues and peer pressure, providing mentoring – and always in the spirit of love and having fun with them. As a result of God’s favor, our pastor’s support, committed volunteers, and lastly our organizational structure, I think we’re running pretty well, and I know that God is pleased with the impact GRACE is making in the lives of teen age girls. For it is God who is transforming the teen girls; we are only the change agents and vessels God is using for his perfect work.

Q: Scripturally, what are your guiding influences for the ministry?

A: We teach our girls to be fearful of the Lord. We know that we are all striving to be the Proverbs 31 woman. We should not be so wrapped up in external things, but to instead see that our beauty is from the inside and that we need to exhibit the fruits of the spirit. That’s the No. 1 focus of the GRACE Ministry – love, patience, kindness, gentleness. We show the girls these gifts and we ask them to show and share these gifts to the world, to think of themselves as beautiful in God’s eyes. Our society is saying that without a certain body size or hairstyle, they aren’t beautiful. We tell them, ‘You are beautiful and loved’ because you have been created in the image of God.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

- ⇒ What kind of legacy do you want to leave that will impact the lives of teenagers?
- ⇒ What can you do in your church community to bridge the gap between society’s negative view and God’s positive view of teenagers?

A longtime member of Apostolic Church of God in Chicago, Sheila Mack is the co-founder and director of GRACE Ministry. She has been in youth ministry working with teenage girls since 1994 and is the founding president and CEO of ESTHER Ministries Inc. She has an MEd in adult and corporate instructional management and a BA in communication arts from Loyola University in Chicago.



 **FIND OUT MORE ...**

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Who?

Who but the insecure are concerned about status?

Who but the unsure insist on having the right answer?

Who but the disbeliever turns away a neighbor?

Who but the hoarder fears loss?

Who but the attacker would defend?

Who but the angry fear a loving God?

Who but those who judge others feel judged?

Who but those who feel condemned would condemn?

Who but the weak are proud?

Who but the fearful seek power?

Who but the seeker will find?

Who but the giver can receive?

Who but the listener can hear?

Who but the forgiver will be forgiven?

Who but the healer will be healed?

Who but the humble will perceive Spirit?

Who but the honest are at peace?

Who but the defenseless are powerful?

Who but the gentle are joyful?

Who but those who love can receive love?

Who we are is up to us.

– Skip Londos

Books and Resources

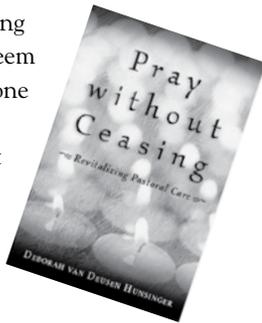
***Pray Without Ceasing: Revitalizing Pastoral Care* by Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger**

Wm. B. Eerdmans (Grand Rapids, 2006). ISBN: 0-8028-4759-5. 250 pp.

The most interesting and significant books seem to grow out of at least one problem that their authors identify and want to remedy. Hunsinger identifies a problem with contemporary pastoral care, namely, that it often lacks a basis in theological reflection on prayer. Various “spiritualities” abound in the North American church. Simultaneously, mainline Christians draw sparingly from the Bible and the rich traditions that provide wisdom concerning this ancient spiritual practice, one that offers a “lifeline” for relationship with God and others in Christ.

Hunsinger attributes this problem with pastoral care to two factors. First, she asserts that large numbers of Christians are uncomfortable with prayer, especially praying with others. Mainline Christians, like the broader culture, increasingly view the spiritual life as a private matter and shun the level of intimacy that praying with another requires. A second factor, and perhaps the more basic one, Hunsinger says, involves inadequate education. Too few ministers are taught in seminary how to think theologically about prayer and its practice. Consequently, prayer does not find a central place in ministries of care. Because of these two factors, not only ministers, but those who rely on ministers for guidance, lack facility with this most vital of faith practices. The result is less frequent and fervent praying, which hinders relationships with God and one another.

Hunsinger responds to this deficit with



wisdom, discretion and conviction. She identifies three requirements for faithful pastoral care: community, listening and praying. She then helps readers appreciate how each requirement underpins the life of faith. She begins with a concern for *koinonia*, a community united in Christ. Any “working theology of prayer” must grow out of *koinonia* and feed back into it, she says. She then moves to a thorough treatment of how one may learn to listen more faithfully to God, others and oneself. She then considers various types of prayer (petition, intercession, lament, confession, and praise, thanksgiving, and blessing) and demonstrates how these nurture individuals and congregations in their relationship to God, one another and the world. To “pray without ceasing” remains the heart of the Christian vocation. Hunsinger challenges caregivers to pray for and with God’s people as Jesus did and to equip others to do the same.

Hunsinger has given us one of the most significant books on prayer of the last several decades. Her beautifully crafted book has the rare ability to engage multiple audiences, including seminarians, ministers and laypersons. Readers will grow from an encounter with Hunsinger’s discerning mind and pleasant spirit, both of which shine in this book. She challenges all of us to deepen the care and nurture that we offer on God’s behalf, not only to one another but to a world in need.

Allan Hugh Cole Jr. is the Nancy Taylor Williamson Associate Professor of Pastoral Care at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Austin, TX. He is author of *Losers, Loners, and Rebels: The Spiritual Struggles of Boys* (with Robert C. Dykstra and Donald Capps) (Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), and three



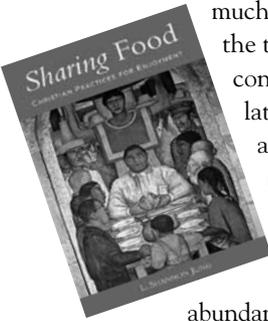
forthcoming books: *Be Not Anxious: Pastoral Care of Disquieted Souls* (Eerdmans); *From Midterms to Ministry: Practical Theologians on Pastoral Beginnings* (Eerdmans); and *Mourning Well: Strategies for Getting through Your Grief* (Westminster John Knox Press).

Sharing Food: Christian Practices for Enjoyment
by L. Shannon Jung

Fortress Press (Minneapolis, 2006). ISBN: 13: 978-080063792-2.
197 pp.

Eating is not just a way to sustain life, but an occasion to be mindful of one of God's greatest gifts to us – the joy of sharing food and hospitality. In this book, Jung helps us explore the spiritual and emotional dimensions of sharing food.

Jung admits to a strong interest in food, including the preparation of and the enjoyment derived from eating good meals. Jung encourages a greater awareness and consciousness about eating. He knows that in the pace of today's typical life people often eat on the run. He sees such behavior as a great loss, for the individual and the community, because



much more happens around the table than simply the consumption of food. Relationships are enhanced and life takes on greater meaning. Sharing food with others opens us to the possibility of sensing God's grace, abundant and effective, when

we are conscious of God's presence.

Jung is especially aware that sharing food has both local and global dimensions. We all share the common need for food, but some have much more difficulty attaining its blessings than others. Enter the important gift of hospitality, which invites others to our tables and makes us more aware that food is not something all people can take for granted. This book is not simply about one's own consumption of good food – it's about everyone's need for food.

There are rich historical and cultural discussions about humanity's long struggle to find enough food to survive. The book notes that Americans are generally overfed, creating an unhealthy state that can affect the way we view ourselves, not just physically, but in a broader spiritual sense. Jung argues for a restoration of the Christian practice of fasting, and balances that with a plea to restore a greater appreciation of feasting, again tying this to

spiritual meaning.

Shared meals were central to the life of Jesus and to those early communities of disciples. Losing the value of sharing food impinges on the whole of the Gospel and of our understanding of God as the ultimate source of personal, social and spiritual nourishment. In other words, sharing food is no small matter from a religious and human perspective.

This book is an easy read, seasoned with personal stories, while challenging our thinking about the many aspects of hospitality. The demise of the family meal in many homes is widely recognized and its loss is both a symptom and a cause of faltering families.

There is much to recommend about this publication. It reminds us that eating is something we do daily, but perhaps not well. It also describes the importance of sharing food as an act of Christian discipleship and aestheticism. We are created by God to enjoy life at its deepest level. Gathering around the table to share food, and life itself, is a way to experience the joy God intends for us all.

David M. Thomas, PhD, is co-director of Bethany Family Institute, U.K. and U.S.A, and the associate director of the graduate program in family ministry, Dominican University, River Forest, IL. His interests are many and varied including pastoral theology and lifelong catechesis, astronomy, poetry and walking.



Hope for Children in Poverty: Profiles and Possibilities edited by Ronald J. Sider and Heidi Unruh

Judson Press (Valley Forge, PA, 2007). ISBN: 978-0-8170-1505-3.

168 pp.

Hope for Children in Poverty should be required reading for anyone of faith. As edited by Ronald Sider and Heidi Unruh, the book serves as a compelling and informative amalgamation of some of the finest minds and ministries working today to lift 13 million of our nation's children to a place of hope and empowerment where each day isn't simply a struggle for survival.

Marian Wright Edelman's foreword alone makes the book a worthy acquisition. She and the other authors effortlessly meld statistics and seemingly abstract situations with real human lives and faces, resulting in a clarion call

for justice and charity that echoes throughout the book. The dire situations facing poor and hungry youth in our country are “morally and practically intolerable,” she argues. Don’t worry about being overwhelmed by the absoluteness of that statement. God’s scripture and encouragement breathe through every writer in *Hope for Children in Poverty*, and the effect is a communal invitation for all to join their cause, trusting in a better future.



After the foreword, the book breaks down into three main sections: the Lives of Children in Poverty, Special Concerns of Children in Poverty, and Biblical Reflections on Children in Poverty.

Interwoven through all of these sections is a careful balance of anecdote, issues analysis, statistics, and ministry profiles to effectively maintain reader engagement and more important, keep the subject in a holistic context. Picking just a few “important” parts out would be impossible and misses the point. However, passages detailing education, health care needs, effective advocacy, and practical methods for caring for poor children can be noted as examples of the quality found throughout. Added (and moving) bonuses are the poems, prayers, and songs strategically included, most written by children and teens growing up in poverty.

It can be argued that this book is not meant to be plowed through in a week (in fact, a free study guide exists at the publisher’s Web site). The weight and grip of the subject matter, combined with the ample amount of information and examples (not to mention inspiration), will have you putting down the book to take time to reflect, discuss, and pray about what you have just read.

Finally, the “target audience” for this resource, as mentioned at the beginning, is any person, group, or church with an open ear to Jesus’s mandate to care for the “least of these.” For those who are just starting to discern how God might put you in service to poor children and their families, you will find support and

abundant knowledge on potential avenues for investing your time, gifts, and voice.

For those already hip deep in ministry and advocacy for poor children, there is a wealth of affirmation and fresh ideas to both bolster existing ministries and ward against potential burnout. Furthermore, the ministries and organizations described are from diverse locations and environments, thereby offering views on what may prove useful in disparate settings.

For all readers it will serve as a potent challenge and call to action – personally, professionally, communally, and most of all scripturally.

To close with the words of contributing writer Jennifer Coulter Stapleton, the underlying message of *Hope for Children in Poverty* boils down to a fundamental call on the reader’s part. “Pray, advocate, serve – these three actions done in conjunction will have a powerful impact. Thirteen million children are waiting.”

Seth Wispelwey is Texas/Oklahoma regional organizer for Bread for the World, a nationwide Christian citizens’ movement to overcome hunger and poverty. He holds a B.A. in English from the University of Virginia. Before coming to Bread for the World in late 2004, Seth lived and traveled in California and Nicaragua.



He currently serves on the board of directors for Texas Impact and Seeds of Hope Publishers.

***Living Faith: How Faith Inspires Social Justice* by Curtiss Paul DeYoung**

Fortress Press (Minneapolis, 2007). ISBN-10: 0-8806-3841-7. 186 pp.

In *Living Faith: How Faith Inspires Social Justice*, Curtiss Paul DeYoung examines the lives of three individuals whose faith motivated extraordinary social activism. He first relates, in a brief but compelling manner, the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor who challenged the German Nazis in the 1940s. He next tells the story of Malcolm X, a Muslim who stood against racism in the United States – and, ultimately, to oppose all human injustice. The third story DeYoung recounts is that of Aung San Suu Kyi, a Buddhist and a Nobel Peace Laureate who endured many years of hardship in the struggle against tyranny in Burma.

DeYoung describes these three – along with others who have made similar journeys and contributions – as “mystic-activists.” He delves into the lives of these spiritual forebearers to find inspiration for spiritual leaders in the 21st century. His goal is to discover those elements of faith that led the social activists of the previous century to persevere in their efforts in the face of widespread spiritual devastation. “By penning this book,” he writes, “I choose hope and the faith that leads to peace and justice.”



DeYoung first discerns that the sacred writings and narratives of all the major faith groups hold an unequivocal mandate for social justice and call sharply into question any unjust social order. For him, then, religious writings and holy narratives become the foundation for social activism. He also concludes that the faith experience of activists who persevere for any length of time always includes spiritual discipline. Meditation and prayer, listening for a word from the divine or an inner voice, enable them to sustain an inner equilibrium in the midst of the external maelstrom.

DeYoung then explores how these elements of faith that inspire social action became daily practice for Bonhoeffer, Malcolm X and Suu Kyi. For Bonhoeffer, it was the discovery of “the view from below,” the ability to look at the world through the eyes of the marginalized and oppressed. For Malcolm, who was persecuted for his color, it was first a resistance to the systemic evils of white society, which then became a broader calling to ensure human rights for all people. For Suu Kyi, it was a “revolution of the spirit” that gave her the grace to reach out in love to her persecutors.

DeYoung intersperses these riveting narratives with similar stories of other faith-inspired people such as Mohandas Ghandi, Archbishop Oscar Romero, Nelson Mandela, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rigoberta Menchu. The book includes an appendix with brief biographical sketches of

17 such “twentieth-century mystic-activists.” He refers to them as a “supporting cast” for the three “primary actors.”

Some of these activists grew up in situations of privilege and were converted to the cause of justice through exposure to people who are marginalized. Some of them grew up in oppressed communities and learned to work for freedom. All of them learned, through their scripture and spiritual disciplines, that many of the social structures of their day were evil. They denounced the oppression in the world, but also announced the possibility of a new society – a new way of doing things that will not oppress or marginalize people nor undermine human rights. They were able to continue their work despite personal hardship, because they were convinced they were acting in the will of God.

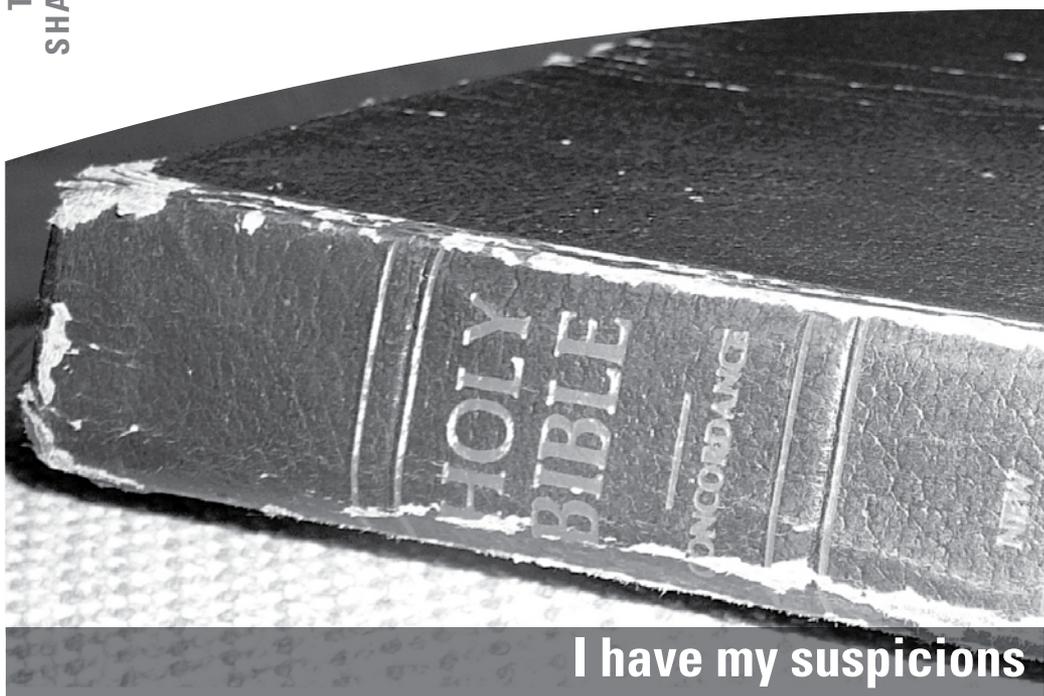
As Bonhoeffer wrote from prison, the ethical question was changed from “How can I be good?” or “How can I do good?” to “What is the will of God?”

It is DeYoung’s hope that the 21st century will be a time “when many more choose mystic-activism and take a journey of faith in the inner regions of the soul and at the outer regions of the society.” *Living Faith: How Faith Inspires Social Justice* is an excellent place to begin that journey.

Katie Cook edits the Seeds of Hope publications Sacred Seasons and Hunger News & Hope, as well as Baptist Peacemaker, the journal/newspaper of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America. She is a deacon and youth teacher at Seventh & James Baptist Church, Waco, TX, and a novice in the Order of Ecumenical Franciscans.



– Amy Castello, section editor



I have my suspicions

Vicki M. Kabat
Associate Director,
Center for Family and Community Ministries



Rosa Avallente Photo

As children, we learned “Jesus loves me” and “Be kind to one another.” Then, as adults, we stumble onto “I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and no one can deliver from my hand” (Deut. 32:39, NRSV). That’s a rough transition for anyone to make. If the God of the New Testament is so loving, how can the God of the Old Testament be so, well, mean?

And that’s usually the order in which we learn it: warm and tender God first, scary and capricious God second. It makes most of us scurry back to the latter portion of our Bibles, never to venture out again.

Yet, the scriptures are full of such inconsistencies, and not just from one testament to the other. How are we to understand and depend upon such an incomprehensible deity or the texts that are to be our guide?

Library shelves are filled with attempts by scholars and theologians to answer that question. It is as sincere an inquiry for them as my 3-year-old son’s question was to him long ago when he asked me, “If God is everywhere, is he in my toenail?” We want logical answers. Mystery and metaphor, poetry and psalmody are so inconclusive.

Because I have no answers, I’ve decided contradictions aren’t so bad. The realization that there can be more than one “right” and one “wrong” – yet all be encompassed by some overarching truth – epitomizes the essence of the “living Word” to me.

I am reading Walter Brueggemann’s *Deep Memory Exuberant Hope: Contested Truth in a Post-Christian World*.^{*} Brueggemann is one of the leading Old Testament scholars of our day. Here is a man who not only stumbles into the canon, he sets up residence there. Thank God he does because he casts light on the path for the rest of us.

In referencing the Deuteronomy citation above, Brueggemann says such statements “invite [us] to life in the contradiction” (p. 49). He discusses the

^{*}Brueggemann, W. *Deep Memory Exuberant Hope: Contested Truth in a Post-Christian World*. Fortress Press (Minneapolis), 2000.

“hermeneutics of suspicion” and notes that such examination of the canon can be instrumental and “needs to be understood dialectically, making way for the new that can only come in the wake of suspicion” (p. 44).

I’m not a seminarian or a theologian. I work in a university environment populated by both, so I tread lightly upon these waters that run so deep. My brief foray into seminary classes left me wondering how anyone’s faith could survive such rigorous intellectual and spiritual calisthenics.

Nevertheless, I loved those debates I had with my professors and classmates about belief, divinity and, yes, contradiction. The pure adrenaline rush that occurs when a new thought pops into your head like a corn kernel under enough heat. Making your point incontrovertibly, only to have it batted back at you, like a birdie over a badminton net. Such a mental workout could go on all night and end with a Grand Slam breakfast at Denny’s the next morning. It was invigorating and exhausting.

At some point, though, I understood that this was a debate without end. The thoughts and ideas – as necessary to us as the blood that flows in our bodies – were there to nourish and compel action – our spiritual muscles, our living out of the Word. Put another way, the rubber *will* meet the road.

When I later worked on a church staff, I had to turn those X-treme Games of seminary into Survivor reality. I was a Christian educator at a small church, one-third of a staff that included a part-time secretary and custodian. The great questions of faith and life did not cease to exist for the church’s members just because we had no pastor, so they sometimes came to me – the only one in the office after 2 p.m. I was so ill-prepared. I remember sitting across from an earnest parishioner who was asking me, “How could a loving God allow his only son to be tortured and killed?” I was stunned – not at the question, but that someone thought I would have an answer, maybe that anyone would have “the” answer.

What I learned at that moment, and have found to be true since, is that there is great value in the phrase, “I don’t know.” I don’t say that flippantly. In fact, the more I learn, the more I realize how little I *do* know.

As I sat with the person asking me that ques-

tion, I prayed silently to God, “Please let me know what to say and what *not* to say.” It may be one of the most important prayers I’ve ever prayed, and I still pray it. Knowing what *not* to say is perhaps the kindest – and most honest – response we can give to those who struggle with these deep, often impenetrable questions of faith.

There are no easy answers and there is no infallible proof. That asks of faith what is impossible of it. To ask for or provide either – or to think you can – is the opposite of faith.

But I do value the question, the “suspicion” as Brueggemann describes it. I think God delights in the question. It is engagement, conversation, relationship. I rage at God, I implore God, I wrestle with God, as surely as Jacob did. But I am there, and God is there with me.

I told the woman that day, as we sat in the dimly lit Fellowship Hall together, that I didn’t know the answer to her question, but that I would travel with her as we searched for the answer.

Thomas Merton in the prologue to *No Man is an Island*, speaks of anxiety as a mark of spiritual insecurity. “One of the moral diseases we communicate to one another in society comes from huddling together in the pale light of an insufficient answer to a question we are afraid to ask,” he writes.

We must ask, and then “live into the question,” as the poet Rilke says. Poets again! But what else is faith? Although we may understand little now, we will come to another kind of “knowing” – an eternal conversation with our Creator in which new understanding pops into our minds like blossoms from a bud in time-elapse photography.

Whether we’re looking for God in our toenail or in our spirit, in the pages of the canon or the Gospel, always the Scripture – the “living” Word – is there, batting the ideas back and forth with us, “making way for the new.” What other religious text does this?

My spirit and my life are full of contradictions, but each has something to teach me, if I choose to pay attention. That our Creator would encourage us to engage in this exchange – and out of it enable us to comprehend new perspectives of truth – is astounding.

As any highly educated theologian *ought* to say: “How cool is that?!”

BOXES

How many ways are there to do the same thing?

Only one, of course.

If it is in a magazine or

In a book or

On a shelf or

Someone else has done it before,

Then it is okay - or

If you have done it before.

But what if -

What if -

The sky is really what we walk on and

The grass is what we breathe?

What if -

Marbles give us sight and

We shoot eyes?

What if -

Songs are sung to laughter and

Laughs are put to music?

And jigs are hammered and

Nails are danced?

What if?

Why can't the sky be purple and

The yard pink?

Why can't we step in fog and

Wipe our feet on the edge of a bulletin board?

Why not?

What makes one person normal and

Another a demon?

Whose definition?

Whose words?

Whose proclamations?

Whose standard?

Metric or ...?

"You shall know the truth and the truth shall
set you free ..."

But what if?

What if -

No one will listen to the truth?

Because truth is not found in a magazine

And

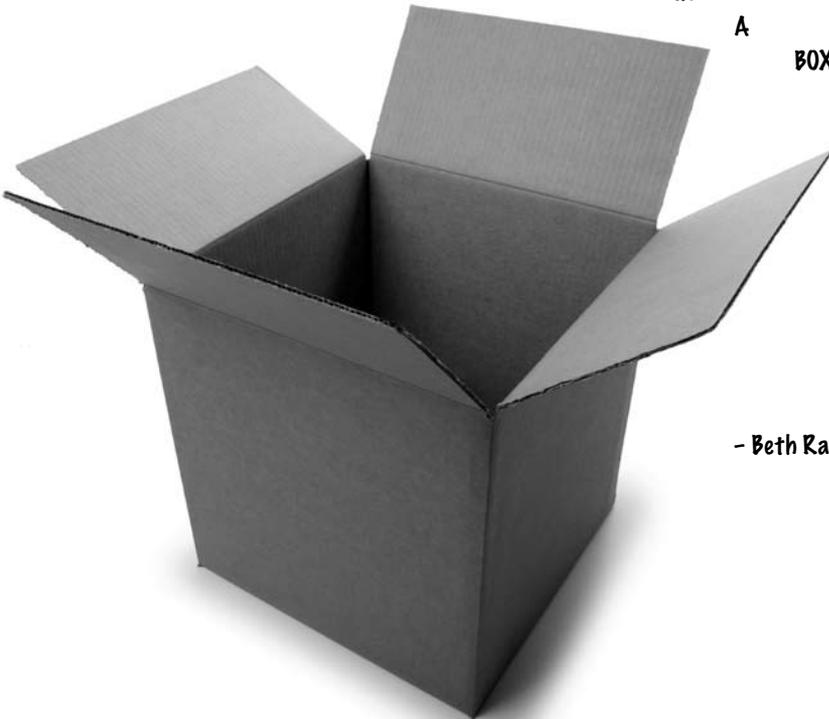
Does not

FIT

IN

A

BOX.



- Beth Rawson Kilpatrick

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Special appreciation to Sgt. Stephen and Karen Birech, MSW student, and their daughters, who assisted the journal with photo illustrations for the article "When veterans come home." Stephen is with the 96th Transportation Company at Fort Hood, TX, and has been deployed to Iraq five times.

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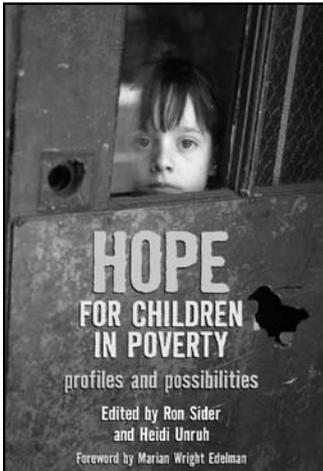
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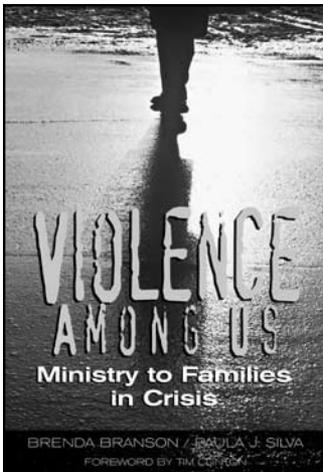
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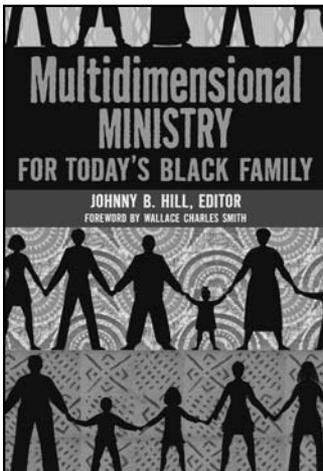
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