

December 2006 Issue Number 2



COMMON LIFE

NEWSLETTER

Dedication to Learning: Bible Study

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Common Words

You'll be reading this during the Advent and Christmas season. So, first of all, I extend wishes for a blessed time in which you and yours may experience the presence of the Spirit of the Christ child.

Christmas is one of the seasons in which we in the church seem to pay more attention to scripture. We attend to the familiar stories as they are told, acted out and sung. We may hear

again the arguments about whether Mary was a virgin, whether Jesus was born in Bethlehem or Nazareth, whether the escape to Egypt really happened or indeed if any of the story is factual. We struggle to find the truth of these narratives. Marcus Borg alludes to this struggle in his comment, "Conflict about the Bible is the single most divisive issue among Christians in North America today." It seems appropriate then that the focus article in this issue deals with bible study.

Learning is one of the disciplines or practices that we as Common Life members commit to. Within this practice, I suggest that bible study is basic. The Bible provides the stories that give life meaning for Christians. Until we see what happens when people such as the First Nations people are deprived of their stories, we take our particular story for granted. Until we see Christian groups distorting the message of scripture to fit an ideology that demeans others, we don't recognize the importance of careful interpretation of the Bible for the sake of peace and justice.

I looked for a reproducible article about bible study that could say what we need as Common Life members. Unfortunately, I couldn't find one and so did my best to write something.

The reading of the Magnificat at this time of year reminds us of the gap between the rich and poor. You might want to take a serious look at the Make Poverty History material in the General News section.

Thank you to all the groups who submitted stories about their common life. I know I am going to ask my group to consider the questions that the New Brunswick group uses at the beginning of their meetings. I look forward to seeing their Common River Booklet. Those of you who studied Ched Myers' book, *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics*, will find Ted Black's comments engaging. Sloe Jam's use of imagery, such as sea glass, could add to our worship. The Lenten Study, "A Song of Faith", edited by Nancy Hardy, a member of the Free Spirits group, is worth considering as a resource for your group. And the Tent Dwellers have undertaken a project with aboriginal women that's worth supporting. Every group has offered a picture of their walk on the Way. Your honesty and vulnerability contributes to our cross centre community.

Edward Hays describes the walking of the way of God as being like walking on a razor's edge. It's not easy. It requires

discipline and practice. We need a balancing bar to help us along. The fellowship and accountability in each of our Common Life groups provides that balancing bar for us as individuals and we trust this newsletter provides a balancing bar for our groups.

Don't forget that this is your newsletter. We appreciate personal contributions, photos, news about projects, stories about group members, biblical and theological reflection. It doesn't matter whether the contributions fit with a theme or not. Next time though, the focus may be accountability for resources. If anyone wants to write an article or can recommend one that would be helpful for our Common Life Community, please be in touch.

Letters to the Editor

Congratulations on a great first CLC Newsletter! I read it right through as soon as it arrived. It really gives meaning to all that we do in our individual groups, bringing a larger scope and focus. Thank you so much for sharing with us what transpired at WCC and giving meaning to "community". I certainly think that the contributions of many make for a great newsletter. Thank you so much, Yvonne, for taking on the job of editor and getting the expertise needed for formatting, etc.

Shalom,
Joan Gugeler, Kitchener, Tent Dwellers group

...congratulations and thank you for producing a wonderful newsletter. I really enjoyed reading the articles, especially Parker J. Palmer's article on a "A Spirituality of Community – On Staying at the Table: and also the article that was written by Bea Arnill about Soul Friends.

Jennie Jones Keating, Toronto, Sloe Jam group

That Common Life newsletter is POWERFUL. Thanks for sending it out. I really appreciate it.

Marj Mack, Kerrobert, SK



It is a pleasure to be working on the Common Life Newsletter with Yvonne, and hence, with all of you. As I read and format the materials, I feel inspired by your commitment and the variety of ways you are living out the disciplines of Common Life. I hope this newsletter provides you with a sense of connection to a web that joins us all.

Debra Brown has formatted the last two newsletters and is the Communications Coordinator at Calling Lakes Centre.

Word from the Common Life Groups

Tatamagouche

New Brunswick Group

Group members: Janice MacLean, Marilyn Burrell, Charlotte Campbell, Bob Childs, Shirley Childs, Shawn Redden, Linda Foy

Opening Ritual

The New Brunswick Common Life Group designed the following ritual to give shape to our gatherings.

We begin by lighting a candle and remembering through our opening prayer our commitment to the Common Life practices. After a reading chosen by the leader of the day, we share a time of silence. A significant time is spent in “check in” informed by the question indicated below. Then the leader of the day leads us in a “gift of content” which is our theme for this gathering (chosen by the group previously). After discussion we again share a time of silence and offer prayer that has arisen for us out of our time. We close our meeting time with the litany from the Iona Community before we share a meal.

Candle Lighting:

As we gather in this Common Life circle, we light this candle as a symbol of your light and love present with us.

In its lighting, we remember our commitment

To spiritual deepening and practice

To building community

To engagement for justice and

Dedication to learning.

May we be attentive and alert to how you would have us live in ways that bring healing to our world. Amen.

Psalm or Reading

Silence

Check In:

In what ways is your life and Common Life connecting these days? Joys? Challenges? Questions?

Gift of Content and Time for Discussion

Silence and Prayers of Intercession

Closing Prayer: (Iona Abbey Worship Book, 2001)

This we know, the earth does not belong to us.

We belong to the earth.

This we know. All things are connected,

Like the blood that unites one family.

This we know, we did not weave the web of life,

We are merely a strand in it.

This we know, whatever we do to the web,

We do to ourselves.

Let us give thanks for the gift of creation,

Let us give thanks that all things hold together in Christ. Amen.

See also, *The Universe as Scripture – The River Project*, by Janice McLean in the *Articles* section (page 9).

Tatamagouche Area Group

Current Members: Wayne Edgar, Pam Swainson, Linda Stumpf, Wilf Bean, Kathryn Anderson, Mary Corbett and Jan Haynes. Av Singh and Karen Sheppard on a year's leave from the group.

The following is a brief personal reflection by Pam Swainson on her Common Life experience.

Personal Reflections on Common Life experience

I have been part of our Tatamagouche Area Common Life group since the beginning of the program. We have met consistently over the years and have had a little membership turnover. As a member of a Common Life Group I have experienced connection, support and opportunities for growth with attention to the spirit. Over time our group ‘community life’ and sharing has deepened in supporting spiritual growth and personal connections.

We decided early in our time together to keep that time as uncomplicated as possible. We meet once a month and share a simple meal of bread and soup. Leadership for discussion, check-in and worship is shared among the members. Over the past few years we have read and discussed a number of books, had sustained discussion and group activities on topic areas (i.e.: household economics), and occasionally a longer ‘check in’ time when needed. We try to ensure a regular review of the five practices takes place.

For me personally, the group has supported some significant changes in my life. A few examples are:

- ❖ In our home we now have a ‘300 mile rule’ for food. As much as possible we consume food grown within 300 miles. Our coffee is exclusively fair trade – and we ask for it when we do have coffee outside the home. (Of course with the wonderful Breaking-the-Silence coffee from Guatemala this is not a hardship!) I ask where food is from and how it was grown. I would have done this sometime of the time, but now it is with more intention.
- ❖ Use of daily prayer and reflection.
- ❖ An examination of our addiction to full agendas and how we over-spend our personal resources has resulted in some conscious examination of each call for action or participation.

The support of my Common Life group has been very real. It has been a crucible for personal spiritual growth. I would say, our discussions and activities have contributed to a deepening in the integration of the personal, political and spiritual.

Sometimes it has been fun too. ~ Pam Swainson

Word from the Common Life Groups

Five Oaks

Anamchairade [Soul Friends]

Group members: Gail Lucas-Roth, Paul Roth, Trish Strung, Amy Hill, Ione Grover, Bea Arnill, Des McCalmont, Joan McCalmont

Anamchairade has a new name. After meeting for two years, we gathered in Mississauga in October to discern our future path. For the next two years we will be known as “**Soul Friends**”. Seven of us have recommitted, while Trish has decided to take a sabbatical from gatherings for awhile. We all continue to contact one another once a month, and in late November, most of the group will gather in Brighton at the Roth’s for an overnight event. We are blessed and enriched by each gathering.

When we check in at each meeting it is amazing to hear about the diversity of experiences. At our last meeting we heard from two of our members who attended the African/Canadian Grandmothers to Grandmothers event in Toronto (Started by Stephen Lewis to support grandmothers in Africa raising grandchildren orphaned by AIDS.) They had truly been inspired and were enthusiastic in the retelling of their experience, as well as their participation with other Canadian grandmothers since that event. Another member had achieved a personal goal by participating in a Habitat for Humanity “Build”. Sharing these stories with each other is a great encouragement.

Our discussions of the disciplines usually includes our successes and our lapses. We decided that guilt was not a thing most of us wished to heap upon ourselves, and so we applauded the wisdom of one of our members who suggested working at one discipline at a time.

Free Spirits

Group members (L to R below): Nancy Hardy, Yvonne Stewart, Lilojean Frid, Marion Kirkwood, John Klassen, BJ Klassen, Michele Braniff, Valerie Carson Kilpatrick. Absent: Mary Joan Bradley.

General Council Report

We invited Debbie Kigar, former Chair of Five Oaks’ Board and delegate to the 2006 General Council in Thunder Bay, to attend our overnight August meeting to report on highlights of the proceedings. Two reports stood out for us and seemed most relevant to our Common Life practices. They are: *A Song of Faith*, the United Church’s new statement of faith and the report, *Living Faithfully in the Midst of Empire*. We decided to proceed with a study of *A Song of Faith*. As well, we established a regular agenda pattern for our meeting (as an experiment) which goes like this:

- ♦ opening meditation,
- ♦ check-in related to our personal lives and to our practice of the disciplines,
- ♦ input/content/ discussion regarding an issue related to one or more of the disciplines,
- ♦ time to attend chapel
- ♦ time for silence and wandering the Five Oaks grounds,
- ♦ a creative reflection on the issue or plan of action,
- ♦ evaluation and theological reflection,
- ♦ closing ritual.

A Song of Faith

At our October meeting, in the Retreat House at Five Oaks as always, we first looked at *A Song of Faith* through the lens used in this year’s Lenten study which is based on the new statement of faith. We are blessed by having Nancy Hardy in our group who wrote for and edited the Lenten study. For the purposes of the study, Nancy had broken the “song” into seven “verses” – with a repeating refrain. The “verses” are: We Sing of Creation, We Sing of God the Creator, We Sing of Grace, We Sing of God the Spirit, We Sing of Scripture and Worship, We Sing of Jesus, We Sing of a Church, We Sing God, our Hope. At our meeting, she indicated how the “verses” might relate to the disciplines of Common Life.

We began by meditating on the “refrain.” And continued by reflecting on the first section “We Sing of God the Creator” comparing the new statement to the appropriate articles of the Basis of Union and the 1940 Statement of Faith to see what a dramatically new statement this is. In the afternoon, we



Free Spirits Group

Word from the Common Life Groups

considered in silence, in art and in journal writing how this section related to our own faith, the practice of our disciplines and the general living of our lives. In a one day session, this was a somewhat overwhelming process but we plan to reflect on the next section We Sing of Grace at our overnight December meeting.

See also, *Old Camel Eye*, a short story by Michele Braniff in the *Personal Contributions* section (page 10).

Shekhinah Seekers

Group members: Pam Byers, Barbara Bitzer, Peg Earle, Jane Entiknap, Carol Gierak, Lloyd Smith

This group is not reporting this time around. They continue to meet regularly and we will be interested to catch up with them next time.

Sloe Jam

Group members: Janet Saunders, Lynn Godfrey, Thom Davies, Margaret Fisher, Deborah Hart, Jennie Jones, Louise Simms, Lucy Magnus-Burke

Thom Davies sent us the rule of life for the Northumbria Community. He found it by surfing the web. At our last meeting, we worked on accountability, which has caused us a long struggle. We kept asking, "What is accountability?" We didn't get it. The Northumbrian Rule of Life seemed to explain the CLC disciplines in a different way, which we found helpful. Now we feel as if we are starting to get it and are actually being accountable.

This is the summary of the rule of the Northumbria Community – A Way for Living. This is the Rule we embrace. This is the rule we will keep:

- ☼ we say YES to AVAILABILITY;
- ☼ we say YES to VULNERABILITY."

We are called to be AVAILABLE to God and to others: to be available to God in the **cell** of our own heart; to be available to others in a call to exercise **hospitality**; to be available to others through participation in God's care and concern for them, by praying and **interceding** for their situation in the power of the Holy Spirit; to be available for participation in **mission**.

We are called to intentional, deliberate VULNERABILITY by being **teachable** – through a discipline of prayer and exposure to Scripture, and a willingness to be accountable to others in ordering our ways and our hearts to effect change.

We embrace the responsibility of taking the HERETICAL IMPERATIVE by speaking out when necessary or asking awkward questions that will often upset the status quo and by making relationships the priority, and not our reputations.

We did ask each other penetrating questions. Perhaps we have come to know and trust each other enough to bare our souls and to make clear observations and respond authentically. The discussion felt intimate and honest in its depth.

In the end, I can say that *Sloe Jam* liked this "Rule of Life" because it helps us stay connected to God in the present moment by noticing the now – not by adding disciplines to an already busy life but by becoming conscious of God in what we are already doing.

We have been meeting in Toronto for Margaret's sake (who lives in Kingston) since she has been teaching one class a week at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. Because Margaret's husband, Jim, is dealing with cancer, Sloe Jam has turned inward to support her. Sloe Jam is also struggling with understanding the connection to the wider CLC community, and its members admitted to not reading the newsletter thoroughly.

Symbols in Worship

by Jennie Keating (nee Jones)

The Sloe-Jam Common Life group has been using "symbols" for their reflection time.

Pitch Pine Saplings

At one meeting, a member of the group asked everyone to pick a "pitch-pine" tree sapling that spoke to them. We were then asked to reflect on how our little tree spoke to us in relation to our faith journey.

Some of us shared a personal story about how the tree sapling was a metaphor of our life. Other reflections included:

- ☼ There is a lot of new growth on my tree.
- ☼ It has been a rough journey.
- ☼ There have been bare patches in my faith journey.
- ☼ There is a dead spot in my tree and also new growth. During part of my life I thought God was not there, yet I know he was there helping me to move on. I see that when I look at the new growth that is right beside the dead patch.
- ☼ The textures really spoke to me. My faith life is sometimes smooth and other times it feels somewhat prickly.
- ☼ The different colours of the tree sapling were meaningful to me.
- ☼ I think about the journey this sapling will take through its life and how it relates to my life and my faith journey. My plan is to plant it at my cottage and call it the "Faith and Hope Tree" and have the whole family dedicate it. Have everyone take responsibility for nourishing the tree by making sure it is planted properly in a space where it can get light yet is also protected and that it is given food and water.



Continued on next page

Word from the Common Life Groups



Sea Glass

At another meeting, another member of the group asked everyone to choose one piece of “sea glass” from the glass jar that she had placed on our worship table. She also read a beautiful reflection that the

friend who gave her the “sea glass” had written. We were asked to reflect on how the piece of glass we chose reflected our spiritual journey and our common life disciplines.

We talked about how the sea glass had changed so much during its life. It started out as a bottle that no one wanted, became broken with many rough edges, was kicked around by waves during its long journey and finally ended up on a beach somewhere as this beautiful smooth piece of glass. Often, we overlook the beauty of things that have drifted onto the shore. “It’s only a piece of glass – so what – who would want that!”

Reflecting on the journey that the piece of glass had taken was very meaningful for the six members of our group present at [our] meeting. We also reflected during worship time on the two members of our group who could not be with us.

Some thoughts that were shared include:

- ⌘ My piece of glass has three smooth edges yet one edge is jagged.
- ⌘ In the middle of the glass it sort of looks “misty”. Sometimes my spiritual life is not clear – it feels like I am looking through a foggy mist and can’t see where I need to go.
- ⌘ I find I am too negative. I look only at the broken part of my life and the Common Life disciplines that I am not doing well at. I need to focus more on all my wonderful accomplishments.

Tent Dwellers

Group members: Joan Graham, Celia Orth, Joan Gugler, Ellice Oliver, Lorraine Dykman, Henk Dykman, Peg Simmons, Doug Ross, Eleanor Brent

From the beginning, the Tent Dwellers have felt connected to Five Oaks. We had our first meeting in the Retreat House and enjoyed the space so much that most of our meetings (other than house blessings) have been there. We want to be supportive of Five Oaks and hence our enthusiasm for the tree-planting project and the Purple Martin house.

Another interest of ours has been Native/Aboriginal Spirituality and we have been looking for meaningful work that would honor that as well. To that end we have met with Brenda Simpson, principal of the Francis Sandy Theological Centre, to see how we could connect with the Centre. We hope to be doing some volunteer work for them in sorting library books. Some of

our learning has been related to aboriginal issues and we have had “smudging” as part of our worship on several occasions.

After much deliberation, we have come up with a project that connects these two interests. You may be aware that Five Oaks sponsors “wellness week-ends” for marginalized women in the community. Each year a different group is chosen and a couple of years ago a group of women from an aboriginal “Friendship Centre” were at Five Oaks for a weekend. They had a wonderful time and wanted to return, but because there is a new group each year and because they lack funds they cannot afford to do so. While we cannot meet the \$8000 cost for a full weekend, our group has decided to support some day program hours that would allow aboriginal women to come for the day, and have lunch and some programming. Each time we get together, we each contribute \$5. In addition some of us will find other ways to add to the amount. For example, we might want to honor someone at Christmas with a donation instead of a gift. By June, we believe we will have sufficient funds to make a difference to some women. **(If this appeals to any of the other groups we’d love to have “partners”).**

Tilted to the Centre

Group members: Don Robinson, Barbara Buttars, Jan Aylward, Ruth Ferguson, Ted Black

Since 2002 our group has been meeting regularly and has formed a rich bond of friendship. Meeting at Five Oaks is the norm but we have met elsewhere and freely decide that as we gather. Our worship times are meaningful openings to centre our thoughts before we move into our in-depth check-ins.

We have completed our discussion of “The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics” by Ched Myers. Here is a reflection from Ted Black.

The Ched Myers book on Sabbath Economics is one of those very short works that can have a huge impact on how we read the Bible, how we view our western world, how we pray for and work for justice.

However the transformation of worldview that is called for in the book is so radical that I found myself looking for an “out.” My mind threw up questions such as “Is the exegesis so ideologically driven that [the] text is made to say things that just aren’t there?” Or, “Is Myers so romantically connected to an agrarian culture that he is not speaking realistically to our urbanized reality?”

I don’t know if books that provoke such resistance can lead to changed practice, but I believe that in some significant way they serve to loosen the mortar in the walls we erect between our narrowly comfortable lives and the wider shared life of God’s reign.

We continue to choose new topics and issues that challenge us to stretch and grow in new ways. When we meet in November, since the Advent season is approaching, we will be pondering thoughts such as: “What do each of us look for and learn during Advent?” We receive great strength and learning from one another and there is always a joyous greeting as we come together each time and reconnect in new ways.

See also, *Looking Out the Window* by Don Robinson on page 17.



Bible Study

“A Songbook for Jailbirds”

By Yvonne Stewart

“How can there be singing in times like these?”

“In times like these, there must be singing. Singing about times like these.”

(Bob Haverluck)

“Put that thriller down – you’ve got a job to do. The United Church is encouraging its ministers and members to commit to reading the entire New Testament three times over the next three years.”

This sentence tucked among the October Observer’s reports on General Council, stood out for me as if it were already underlined with yellow marker. Maybe this was so because I enjoy reading scripture. Or, because I was mulling over the possibility of writing an article for this newsletter about our Common Life discipline of learning and the importance of bible study as part of this practice.

Some folks probably responded to this proposal saying, Yes!! That’s what we SHOULD be doing! And others thinking, Why would I want to do that?! ... The Bible was always used as a stick to coerce us kids to be good or to hell we would go. I don’t like the way the Bible has been used to deny the value of women, gays and lesbians, creation, slaves....

Fundamentalists use the Bible to create antagonism among Christians and towards people of other faiths, why not just throw the whole thing out. Dialogue is too much trouble. ...The Bible isn’t relevant to modern times with its exploration of space, environmental crises, quantum physics and computer sophistication and I couldn’t understand all the books written to explain how it could be.... I’d rather avoid the Bible and look for the divine in creation and community, and seek experiences of God through prayer and meditation.... I haven’t time.

In the face of such reservations, biblical scholars and other ordinary folk,

passionately assert that reading the Bible is essential in this day and age. And I propose that it is important for us to do, as members of Common Life Communities.

Perhaps we need a dramatic image to emphasize the urgency. Bob Haverluck, a Winnipeg-based theologian, biblical student and artist, describes the Bible as A Songbook for Jailbirds – suggesting that it was written by people in jail, on their way to jail or on their way out of jail. If we think of ourselves as captive in an alien land of war and terrorism, wasteful consumerism, human rights abuse, environmental degradation, great gaps between rich and poor, unfair trade, corruption – you name your concern – might we see ourselves as “jailbirds” who need to turn to this “songbook?” How might we describe our places of captivity in our lives and world today? In our “jail cells”, might we want to turn to the God to which the Bible points, seek hope for a world transformed and a way to follow?

I’m not a musical person and so this image of the Bible as a songbook does not flow easily for me but I think it is worth a try. Here are some thoughts that help convince me (and I hope you) of the importance of reading scripture.

The Bible as a Song of Liberation

The content of the biblical “song” tells the story of how the world is meant to be. As do songs, the biblical stories and teachings set forth poetic images. These images enable us to believe in the presence of God’s community here and now, even when we despair at the state of our society – or fear the personal changes and losses the fulfillment of such images might bring to our lives. We sing of a community in

which the last ones will be first (Luke 13: 30), in which the humbled ones will be exalted (Luke 14:11), in which the hungry ones will be fed (Luke 1:53) and in which the ones who mourn will be comforted (Matt.5: 4), in which the captives will be free (Luke 4:18) in which there will be no more destruction (Isaiah 65:25). The biblical “songs” invite us to commit to God’s vision and reject every other vision of what community can be. When we are struggling with captivity in other worldviews, we need a vision of liberation. Without the Bible, we lose this vision. Our First Nations people can tell us what happens when a community loses its story.

The images of the Bible point us to the healing, liberating work of God already happening in the world and creation. When we see creation being tenderly cared for rather than dominated, or people given opportunities to receive an education, good health, and useful work that enables them to have their own “vine and fig tree”, we know where to join in the “singing.” When we see beauty and love and creativity and abundant living, we rejoice and give thanks.

The Bible as a Tune of Accompaniment

We can’t sing God’s song without a tune or musical accompaniment to guide us (at least I can’t and have difficulty at that). Slaves have sung to keep up their spirits; human rights activists of all stripes have marched to hope-giving music. (Remember “We Shall Overcome”?) The music expresses the song’s emotions. So too, can the Bible function as music that lifts our captive spirits and injects newness into a worn out view of the

Articles

world. The music accompanies us as we attempt to walk humbly with God, seeking justice and loving kindness in the world and creation.

The Bible also keeps us “in tune.” Sometimes we think we are living a life of love and justice; then we look in our Bible/ songbook and find that God loves those whom we rail against for their injustice or corruption or narrow interpretation of scripture; that God expects us to love our captors and enemies. Sometimes, we think we are the captives but when we read the biblical stories from the point of view of the marginalized, we realize that we are the captors who need to make painful yet joy-bringing changes in our lives. We see the radical world-changing message of scripture with new eyes.

Using a different image, here is what Walter Brueggemann says to inspire us to open scripture. “... the reading of the Bible, in all its truthfulness, is now urgent because our society is sore tempted to reduce the human project to commodity, to the making of money, to the reduction of persons to objects, to the thinning of human communications to electronic icons.” He passionately asserts that scripture insists that the world is not without God, not without the holy gift of life rooted in love. Scripture is a light to our path. “It is a lamp and light to fend off the darkness. It is for feet and path, ... The darkness is real, and the light is for walking boldly, faithfully in the dark we do not and cannot control.”

The Bible as a Melody that Transforms

Reading the Bible and singing its song repeatedly over time shapes us as individuals and as communities into God’s people. The biblical “song” just like a persistent melody we can’t get out of our minds, becomes a part of us and liberates us from the other songs in our lives that try to make us victim, consumer, dominator.

Marcus Borg refers to this phenomenon in *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*. “To be Christian means to live within the world created by the Bible. We are to listen to it well and let its central

stories shape our vision of God, our identity, and our sense of what faithfulness to God means. It is to shape our imagination, that part of our psyches in which our foundational images of reality and life reside. We are to be a community shaped by scripture. The purpose of our continuing dialogue with the Bible as sacred scripture is nothing less than that.”

Northrop Frye and others would say that we in Western society have been shaped by the “melody” of the Bible, its values and themes whether we are conscious of it or not. (Although, I fear those values may be overshadowed in these times – another reason to intentionally reflect on scripture.) We may also have been shaped by certain interpretations of scripture that we now reject. We don’t have to throw out the Bible; we return to it, listening to its melody with new ears and allowing it to do its mysterious transforming work.

The Bible as a Divine Score

Ultimately the Bible is about God. Its music and words are undergirded by the writers’ experiences of the divine. The writings invite us to engage with the God of history and of today; with the divine in our own hearts and in a people; with the sacred in nature and neighbour.

There are many other essential ways to know and experience God – through attending to creation, prayer and meditation, community life and acts of justice and compassion. The Bible provides a means by which we can reflect on these experiences to discover if they are faithful to the God it reveals.

We all live by a particular story or myth or song that we tell ourselves to give our lives meaning. There are many offered – the one in advertisements that tells us how certain products will improve us or that “money saves” or “power wins.” We are called to choose the biblical story that turns the world upside and says that “the love of God heals, transforms liberates all people, societies, nations, creation.”

Implications for Common Life

There’s still that list of reservations about actually spending time reading the Bible. Marion Pardy, former moderator of the United Church, in her research for her doctor of ministry thesis, *Biblical*

Understandings in Local Congregations, made some observations that may address our negativity. She discovered that despite negative early learnings from biblical teachings, for example, fear of God, many adults had changed this to love of God, or had moved from literal to non-literal understandings of scripture. The narratives shaped their lives but it was significant that they were told to them by people who loved them. That loving communication helped them in later life overcome the earlier negative associations. Common Life Communities, it seems to me, can serve as the loving people who retell the stories of the Bible (or to continue the analogy, sing its songs) to one another until they experience its healing. When we forgive ourselves and others for our experiences of judgmental approaches to scripture, perhaps when possible, we can engage in compassionate conversation with those who hold such views – as a modest contribution to peace in a world raging with fundamentalists of all kinds.

The systemic aspect of the biblical motifs of liberation and transformation – the idea of the Bible as a Songbook for Jailbirds (or women or gays or the poor or creation...) – was less obviously learned, Pardy noted. For example, advocacy work was often relegated to outreach committees or addressed in one or two theme Sundays rather than understood as a value to be integrated into individual and community life in church and world. These biblical motifs require greater visibility and integration in the ongoing biblical education of the congregation in her opinion, as does the notion of church as counter cultural and a place for alternative conversations. Perhaps our study of scripture together as Common Life members, using the excellent and relevant resources now available, will impact not only our own living out of liberation and transformation but that of the ongoing life of our congregations.

The Bible may never be a substitute for that thriller we were directed to put down by the Observer and reading right through the New Testament in one swoop might not be our method, but if we see ourselves as captives (and captors) in a strange land,

Continued on page 13

The Universe as Scripture – the River Project

by Janice McLean



New Brunswick Group members, starting at the top and going clockwise: Charlotte Campbell, Linda Foy, Shirley Childs, Marilyn Burrell, Bob Childs, Charlotte Campbell (again!), Janice MacLean. Missing: Shawn Redden.

The New Brunswick Common Life group recently received a Learning-in-Community Grant from the United Church of Canada. Here's our plan and how it came to be!

Some of our members attended a Ched Myers event at Tatamagouche Centre. He urged participants to get to know their bioregion. The focus for the event was building community in a world falling apart. We were reminded that our community includes the natural world, which supports our life. Myers said it is important to have a sense of place in a bioregional way. We need to strengthen the roots we have and so enhance our sense of belonging. As we grow in relationship with this place that is our

home we are obligated to take responsibility for the good of this home. Along with this understanding, other members have a growing awareness of eco-spirituality and still others a strong commitment to lessening our ecological footprint. We are also exploring how the universe, not the Bible, is the 'primary revelatory event' (Thomas Berry and others). On our retreat as a group this year we focused on "water" and the idea of "a river study" was born.

We seek to learn more about our bioregion – "the Maritime Lowland" – through a focus on some of the rivers of New Brunswick. Here is our guiding question: "What river do we belong to? Or another way of asking that question is, of what

watershed are we a part. What sorts of things do that river and watershed do for us and the land on which we live?" (Water Reflections: Enough for All)

We seek to live with respect in creation. We have other questions: What are the names and the uniquenesses of some of the species who live in and around the rivers? In what ways are they adapted to life there and how are they dependent and interdependent on each other? In what ways is human encroachment threatening the balance of life on and near the river – including our own? What can our aboriginal neighbours teach us about the ancient wisdom of the rivers? What writings can help inform and inspire us to deepen theological understanding of the

An Epiphany Story

Old Camel Eye by Michele Braniff

They called him Old Camel Eye. He was called old, even when he had been young. Years under the desert sun riding camel caravans had left him dark, wizened, wrinkled and gnarled. Camel-eye was a look of intimidation he used when he was trading. After the greeting, the listening, the dickering back and forth, the parry and thrust, when he began his cold relentless lunge into the delicate white underbelly of the other side's bargaining position, he would fix on his opponent the look of an ornery, angry camel. It was "the Camel Eye".

There was another story to his name. Back in his glory days of trading, he made his first fortune selling an oil of eucalyptus leaves and olive oil. He would promise blithely in a smooth and honeyed voice: "Why just rub this liniment on the muscles of your animal and the most ornery camel will become so docile, so pliable, he will try to follow you anywhere – even through an eye of a needle – if you could but lead the way!"

Old Camel Eye sighed. Maybe the Glory Days were not the heady days of building his trading empire. Maybe the Glory Days were *after* he met the Carpenter and his son. The Carpenter had been a young man in a big hurry. Old Camel Eye was accustomed to young men like him – fugitives from Roman authorities. They usually were bandits, rebels or zealots and they all wanted to leave quickly and stealthily. The Carpenter had booked passage to Egypt just hours before the caravan left Bethlehem. He had booked passage for three for the price of two. His traveling companions were not young men who would be easy travelers. No, he was bringing a toddling boy-child and a wife. Why, it was dangerous and a nuisance to provide caravan passage to a woman! They should have paid the price of six passengers! It was not very often that anyone had ever bested Old Camel Eye in the trading game.

Old Camel Eye vowed that it would not happen again. The Carpenter had some precious oil to sell. They had started to dicker on the oil but before they got past the parry and thrust, Old Camel Eye had told the Carpenter that he could not make a deal without seeing the oil. Old Camel Eye had already decided that if the oil were half as pure as the Carpenter claimed, well, he would do the *walk-away*. Sometimes it is most shrewd and better business to just walk away from the trading; never finish the deal. Old Camel Eye would step aside when the Carpenter began the relentless lunge for the soft white underbelly of Old Camel Eye's best bargain. When a trader stepped away at the relentless lunge, the other bargainer would fall flat. The Carpenter would spend hours distracted trying to figure out where the deal had gone astray. Then, in the night, taking advantage of the distraction, Old Camel Eye would have one of

his market-boys go through the Carpenter's tent to find the oil and bring it to the caravan trader. Old Camel Eye would not be out-bargained twice by the same man!

The Carpenter's Son was as quiet and easy a traveler as the Carpenter had claimed. They were three days into the trip before Old Camel Eye had a chance to look over the Carpenter's precious oil. It was myrrh – pure and delicate in an ebony jar. Nothing the Carpenter had said had prepared Old Camel Eye for its quality or the quantity. The trading dance began. The Carpenter and Old Camel Eye greeted and each listened. Then, they dickered and began to parry and thrust. Old Camel Eye figured that the Carpenter got distracted. The Carpenter's Son suddenly started to wail and holler and would not let his mother hold him. He carried on even more frantically in the arms of his father. Old Camel Eye wondered if maybe the boy had been frightened at the way his father's voice had changed. The Carpenter's voice got cold and hard as he got ready for the relentless thrust. The Carpenter sold the jar of myrrh for fifty pieces of gold.

Maybe the Carpenter did not comprehend large amounts of money. Fifty pieces of gold may have seemed like a fortune to a tradesman in his situation. Certainly, it was enough gold to pay for passage to and back from Egypt and even enough to support the family for four or five years of living in Egypt. It would be enough, provided the Carpenter was careful and prudent with his money.

But the Carpenter was anything but prudent and it always got started with the Carpenter's Son wailing and screaming and carrying on. The boy was so quiet and easy-traveling all of the rest of the time. The next time the wailing happened, it was about ten hours on the desert side of a watering hole. One of the camel-hands got himself into a situation: some opium; some gambling with other travelers. The camel-hand had gambled away all his wages and then got into debt he could not pay. The debt-holders had beaten him up pretty badly and the camel-hand had tried to smuggle himself back into the caravan, keeping his injuries a secret. He was hurt very badly.

Everyone knew the rules with Old Camel Eye: if a worker was too sick or hurt to work, he had to pay the cost of passage. If anyone, worker or passenger was unable to travel, he had to pay the full cost for the caravan to stop and wait for recovery. The caravan gave no one a free ride.

Old Camel Eye reminded the camel-hand and told him how foolish he had been not to have just come forward back at the watering hole. At least back there, he would have water and

Personal Contribution

company. Out here in the desert, there would be no one but carrion birds to nurse the banged-up young man.

Old Camel Eye had not even noticed the Carpenter's Son or his father until the boy had started to howl and wail and carry on. The Carpenter offered some pieces of gold – enough to pay for the camel-hand's passage all the way to Egypt and to cover the cost of three days' delay while the caravan waited on his recovery.

The same pattern repeated itself over and over again. The hard luck story and then the wailing and hollering. The Carpenter would fritter away a few more pieces of gold to someone whom he had never met before.

Then there was the time that the blind beggar had followed the caravan. He pestered anyone who would talk to him for help to find the Carpenter. The beggar finally found him and it started the same way that it always did. Old Camel Eye saw the carpenter shake his head. The Carpenter's Son did not move and did not make a sound.

Old Camel Eye came a little closer. He thought the Carpenter was a fool to throw away his money at the whim of a small child but he had grown fond of this silent and powerful toddler-boy. Old Camel Eye wondered if the Carpenter's Son was sick or hurt. The beggar had turned to walk away and still the boy had not made a sound. Old Camel Eye thought maybe the Carpenter's Son had drunk bad water. Bad water could kill a grown man! He motioned to get the Carpenter's attention.

The Carpenter's Son followed his father's gaze and – by the God of Moses – such a look the boy fastened upon him. A look of depth and intensity. It was a look that took away his breath and stopped his heart from beating. Then, the boy began to wail. And cry and carry on. The Carpenter's Wife had told him about the look. She called it *agape shaqaph*, the “look of love.” Well, it did not feel like a loving look. So painful and so probing! When he talked about it later with the Carpenter, the Carpenter laughed. “Well the look does not so much bestow love as attract it.”

His comment had not made much sense to Old Camel Eye. The Carpenter explained that the look was like salt in a wound. The look drew all the bitterness, selfishness, greed and trickery out of the depths of a man's soul so that there was nothing left but love. It was the kind of love that carried a message from the angels in heaven about exactly what the man needed to do. Well, Old Camel Eye laughed. No wonder it hurt! It would take a sword cut to the heart to pierce Old Camel Eye deep enough to get beyond bitterness, selfishness, greed and trickery! Those angels would need to probe right down to his lungs to find any love in Old Camel Eye!

When Old Camel Eye got his breath back, he heard his own voice. His voice was solid and assured. “Well, Carpenter, I sold that ebony jar that held your myrrh for 2500 pieces of gold. I was thinking of giving you a finder's fee.”

The Carpenter thanked him for his shrewd trading and suggested ten per cent as the customary finder's fee. A finder's fee was for someone who lined up a new bargain. It was not compensation or a share in the profit after a trader made a bad deal and the other side scored a big profit. Ten per cent would be a downright gift! A foolish and unnecessary gift!

“Oh, that is not nearly enough. I shall sell the myrrh in small quantities. Each vial will fetch at least that amount. I am likely to make twenty or thirty times that much gold from your myrrh. You should have the entire 2500 pieces of gold.” Old Camel Eye tossed him the bag of coins right then on the spot. Old Camel Eye reached into his hip-purse to pay the blind beggar from his own change.

The Carpenter and his family took leave of the caravan a few hours later. Old Camel Eye put the whole thing completely out of his mind until the next summer when he was next back in Egypt. The Carpenter met the caravan at the market. He had his whole family with him. The Carpenter said that his wife was homesick and wanted to return to the Holy Land. Old Camel Eye told him that it was not safe. “Herod has given his men standing orders to kill any boy-child who has not yet seen three summers. Anyone with any money or influence of friends is fleeing or hiding. Now is not the time to travel through Herod's kingdom!”

The Carpenter asked about the folks who had no money or way to flee or hide. “What about those babies?” Then, the Carpenter's Son started to wail and cry and carry on. It was the *agape shaqaph*. If anything, this look of love was more intense. It was deeper and more probing. Old Camel thought his heart may never start beating again.

“Well, I have made a handsome profit on the myrrh. I have lots of gold and I will use it all to help those poor souls and save as many babies as I can!”

By the time that it was safe enough for the Carpenter and his family to return to the Holy Land, Old Camel Eye had long since gone through all the profits from the sale of myrrh. He had figured out a counting system so that for every coin he kept, he gave away two. He had been helping save Israelites from Herod's men. He had been feeding and paying for shelter for widows and orphans and men too sick or crippled to work. It was like the *agape shaqaph* was branded into his eyelids and written deep into his heart. Nothing gave him pleasure like dancing to the song those angels sang to the tune of *agape shaqaph*!

The Carpenter had plenty of his own gold coins to help anyone who approached him on the trip from Egypt to the Holy Land. A few years later, Old Camel Eye went on a long trip East that had been delayed and delayed some more. By the time that Old Camel Eye returned, the Carpenter had left Bethlehem. Old Camel Eye spent years trying to track him down. Years of dancing to the tune of *agape shaqaph*. Old Camel Eye finally discovered that the Carpenter had been working in Nazareth. By

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General News from the Centres

Make Poverty History

Web Site

A year and a half ago, at our Five Oaks annual retreat, all Common Life Groups agreed to support the Make Poverty History Campaign that was gaining momentum before the G-8 meeting in Scotland. Five Oaks also invited Common Life groups from other centres to join us in signing the online petition asking the wealthy nations to forgive the debts of the not wealthy nations. The Free Spirits group in particular has continued to maintain Make Poverty History as a special emphasis. Some of us participated recently in the stand up against poverty and white band days. We invite you to keep up to date on Make Poverty History through its web site www.makepovertyhistory.ca and to join the activities when appropriate for your group.

The Naming of the Dead

If you would like a different perspective on Make Poverty History, and if you enjoy murder mysteries, try reading, *The Naming of the Dead*, by the talented writer, Ian Rankin. The novel is set in the context of the Make Poverty History march in Edinburgh in July 2005 – and the London Underground bombings. A reviewer says, “Rankin refuses to allow journalists and pundits the last word on what those who marched that day were actually up against in the quest to create an egalitarian society globally.”

Time for A Fair Deal

If you want to do something about poverty closer to home, you might want to watch out for discussions of a report called, *Time for a Fair Deal*, released last spring. The largely Ontario-based Task Force on Modernizing Income Security for Working-Age Adults (MISWAA), made up of business executives, social services representatives, people on social assistance, educators, and senators recommended that formal federal and provincial policies be developed to improve the economic security of low income, working-age adults. They noted that our country has formal federal policies relating to child support and old age security with built-in indexing, etc. but not for working-age adults – most of whom are working full time but still living below the poverty line.

Their concern was that when the down turn in the economy comes, this part of society will suffer greatly. Since municipalities across our country assume a great deal of the responsibility for social assistance, most of them would be bankrupt within months of supporting the unemployed if an economic crisis arose. The report makes recommendations to the province of Ontario and the federal government to develop and reform policies that will provide working-age poor adults with income support and means to acquire education and training to obtain decent jobs.

Task Force members are currently making presentations to federal Liberal leadership candidates and other provincial and federal politicians. They hope to make this an election issue in the next federal and provincial elections. Perhaps we can offer

our support when the time and action seems right. As Margaret Mead said, “Never doubt that a small group of citizens can change the world” Or, as Jesus said, with faith, we can move mountains.

The full report can apparently be found on the web sites of the Task Force and the Toronto City Summit Alliance.

Five Oaks



Intrepid pilgrim and Director of Five Oaks, Mardi Tindal, is swallowed by ferns on Iona.

Notes from Mardi

Nancy Reeves to Lead 2007 Common Life Retreat

First, I'm pleased to announce that Nancy Reeves will lead our Common Life Retreat next **May 6 and 7** (Sunday supper at 5:30 to Monday after supper). Nancy's newest book, *A Match Made in Heaven*, will have just been published and is described with the following words: “Improve your relationship with God, using the original ‘how to’ book – the Bible.”

Nancy is a clinical psychologist, spiritual director, poet and author. She is director of the Island Loss Clinic, adjunct faculty at the University of Victoria, conducts many lectures and workshops internationally. She is the author of *I'd Say Yes, God, If I Knew What You Wanted*, *A Path Through Loss* and *Found Through Loss*.

Nancy was recently at Five Oaks co-leading events on Children's Spiritual Formation. One morning after she and I concluded morning chapel prayers together, we began to talk about her recent work with monastic communities in Britain, and I asked her whether she knew about our Common Life Community (she did); and then I found myself inviting her to lead our retreat.... while doubting that it would be possible given that she lives in Victoria. It turns out she will have just finished a retreat at Providence House in Kingston on May 6th,

~| 2 ~so we just need to get her here from Kingston.

General News (continued)

A New CLC Group Launched

Second, our Five Oaks Common Life Leadership team (Nancy Hardy, Deborah Hart, Don Robinson and myself) is looking forward to guiding a third residential retreat with the Shekhinah Seekers and the launch of a new Common Life group, on November 19th to 21st. One of the tasks of the new group will be to decide upon a name, so we'll have that and more news to share in the next edition.

Nancy Cocks to lead 2008 Common Life Retreat in June 2008

Finally, Nancy Cocks, former Deputy Warden of the MacLeod Centre at Iona, and now on faculty of Atlantic School of Theology, has accepted my invitation to lead us in our 2008 Common Life retreat. This will require us moving our retreat time from early May to mid-June. **Please mark June 15-16, 2008** in your calendar now AND know that Nancy will lead an open weekend program immediately preceding the retreat, from Friday, June 13 to Sunday, June 15, to which all are welcome – including Common Lifers. We obviously don't have details worked out yet about theme, etc., but that will come next year.

The Ottawa Group Lives On

The original Five Oaks Common Life groups will remember the sizable Ottawa group attending our annual retreat and the inclusion of their names on our prayer list. The group later left to become affiliated with Stewart House. When Stewart House closed, it was assumed that the group concluded as well. Mardi recently had contact with a member of that group and learned the good news that they are still active. We hope to hear from them sometime in this newsletter.

The Universe as Scripture

(continued from page 9)

interconnectedness of all creation? How can we combine learning with action so that our experiences lead to new awareness, spiritual practices and decisions about living simply? Individually, we have personal hopes for how this project can spiritually and practically enrich our lives and on-going goals within our Common Life group.

Our group will begin our year of study by reading the book by Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinkers Creek* with an eye for how this brilliant wordsmith shares her story of her relationship with her bioregional home. We hope to plan three field trips to New Brunswick Rivers and learn where naturalists, historians and aboriginal leaders could be our guides. We will practice listening to the voice of the river in silence and explore other practices that help us notice, identify and value God's presence in river.

Finally, to integrate our learning and as a way of being accountable to one another, we would like to compile a "Common River Booklet." These pages will capture in words, poems, prayers and photographs our river reflections, questions and commitment to action. We hope to be able to share this with other Common Life participants. ~ Janice MacLean

Old Camel Eye (continued from page 11)

that time, the Carpenter had long since passed away. The Carpenter's Son was grown up and had left town and not taken up his father's trade.

Old Camel Eye continued to search for the Carpenter's Son. It was this search that brought Old Camel Eye to follow the crowd along the shores of Lake Galilee. Old Camel Eye heard of a traveling Jewish teacher – a rabbi. Old Camel Eye listened to the stories about this rabbi and recognized the upside down kingdom that the rabbi preached about. This kingdom would be just the thing to attract the Carpenter's Son.

And so, while everyone else in the huge crowd was straining for a glimpse and trying to hear every word of the rabbi's teaching, Old Camel Eye was looking away from the rabbi and searching the crowd. He was peering at the faces in the crowd in the hopes that the Carpenter's son would look enough like his mother or father that Old Camel Eye could recognize the grown up boy.

The rabbi's voice was gentle and firm. It was melodious but clear as his words carried through the crowd: "Truly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven." The crowd parted. For just a moment, the sea of faces moved and separated. Old Camel Eye had an unobstructed view of the rabbi. Their eyes met. Old Camel Eye's heart missed a beat. It was *agape shaqaph!* The rabbi was the Carpenter's Son! Old Camel Eye wondered if the Carpenter's Son remembered him at all.

"And again, I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

Why, these words were more than a coded greeting. They were much more than a sign of recognition. These words were a tribute to Old Camel Eye's life! A tribute to a life blessed by the *agape shaqaph*, which had pulled Old Camel Eye, against his instincts, and in spite of his greed. That look had pulled Old Camel Eye by the heart. The old rich trader had followed *agape shaqaph*. He had followed like an ornery camel soothed by precious oil, right through the eye of a needle!

Michele Braniff told this story (which she also wrote) during worship with the Free Spirits group. She also gave each member a small wooden camel to hang on a Christmas tree or use as a reminder of this Epiphany story.

A Songbook for Jailbirds

(continued from page 8)

the Songbook for Jailbirds will offer liberating reading that points us toward life in the presence of God.

Written with references from *Struggling with Scripture* (pg.26) and *The Bible Makes Sense* by Walter Brueggemann; *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time* (pg.31) by Marcus Borg; *Biblical Understandings in the Local Congregation* (pg.156) by Marion Pardy and sermon and art, *The Bible: A Songbook for Jailbirds* by Bob Haverluck. (With apologies to Bob who would have done a much more creative and radical and exciting job of such an article.)

Guided Interior Pilgrimage at Five Oaks

By Ruth McDonald

Student Intern at Five Oaks September – December 2005

This pilgrimage of the House of the Interpreter at Five Oaks was designed to be used by groups. There is also a personal pilgrimage available.

Five Oaks is a sacred place to seek God in the heart of all life. I invite you to enter into a journey of the Five Oaks main building, called the House of the Interpreter. As we visit various sites we will stop to reflect on the story of this sacred place. I invite you to let the personalities, history and visions that we encounter on this pilgrimage help you to seek God in the heart of all of your life.

Station 1: Upper Room

In 1950, this property was selected to become a new Christian Education center for lay people in the United Church of Canada. The centre's goal was to enable lay people to be effective witnesses of God's love in the world. It was given the name *Five Oaks* in reference to the five conferences of the United Church that the Centre was to serve and to honour the ancient oak trees located on the property that in the Celtic tradition represent deep-rooted spirituality.

This building was named the "House of the Interpreter" because of a story by John Bunyan entitled *Pilgrim's Progress*. In this book, the "House of the Interpreter" was a stopover for him on his journey from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. The vision of the people who created this center was to provide a "spiritual stopover" for lay people on their journey of faith.

Five Oaks began down the hill in what is now called the Summer Centre. It was an old campground that needed much renovation. In the summer of 1951 several hundred "work-campers" arrived at Five Oaks to get the summer centre ready for programming. Each worker was paid one dollar a day to work for 8 hours painting, rewiring, renovating and creating. By that fall, plans were underway for a main lodge up the hill. The hearthstone of this building was laid in June of 1952 with the presidents of the five central conferences of the United Church of Canada in attendance – Montreal, Bay of Quinte, Toronto, Hamilton, and London.

Volunteers played a huge role in the creation of this building as well. Some put up insulation, some sheeted the roof or laid sub-floors and some laid bricks and stones.

Here on the right hand side of the stone fireplace volunteers laid some very special stones. These stones represent other sacred centres committed to enabling lay people to be the church in their world. You can find stones from Kirkridge in Pennsylvania, Iona in

Scotland, Naramata Centre in British Columbia, PCTC, which is now called "Calling Lakes" in Saskatchewan, and ACTC, which is now called Tatamagouche Centre in Nova Scotia. In particular Iona, Kirkridge and Naramata Centres inspired the founder of Five Oaks, Bev Oaten, to start dreaming about a Christian Education Centre here in Ontario. Bev had a vision to train lay people to "be the church" in the "factory, office and in the world." He was dedicated to making sure that lay people could express their faith beyond attending church on Sunday.

As we stand here by the stones in the fireplace I would like to read I Peter 2: 5-10. It talks about us being "living stones," part of a building or spiritual house made up of a people or a "priesthood" who belong to God and who are called out of darkness into a ministry of wonderful light.

Hear the words of scripture from 1 Peter 2:5-10:

Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ...you are a chosen people, a people belonging to God...called out of darkness into God's wonderful light. (adapted from NRSV)

I invite you to take some time now for reflection using the questions on your handout.



Handout: Take some time now to touch the stones of the fireplace. Remember the vision of Bev Oaten who sought ways to help people to be living stones, to discover and know their identity as God's ministers, God's priests, following Christ in everyday life. Touch the stones again. Remember your own calling to be a living stone, a person who is part of God's healing work in the world, a person who belongs to God, a person who lives in

Resource Materials

God's wonderful light. What are the ways you are one of God's "living stones?"

Touch the stones again and remember and be thankful for our connection to other sacred places of Christian formation and retreat around Canada and the world. What are some sacred places of spiritual formation or retreat for you?

In honour of the vision of the centre to train lay people to live God's love in their workplace, let us sing *I'm Gonna Work So God Can Use Me* (x2) as we move to our next station.

Station 2: Dining Room

Meal-time is important. This dining room is a place of community and connecting at Five Oaks. In the past, everyone: staff and guest alike, took turns as dinner crew, setting the tables, doing dishes, and sweeping up after meals. It was part of Bev Oaten's vision that worship and work would be one and the same. One small part of this practice left for us today as guests is that we pick up our dishes and deliver them to the tubs by the kitchen. Another is that when we arrive we make our own beds. Bev believed that the mandate of Five Oaks was work, worship, learning and witnessing. Oaten also established a practice at Five Oaks in the 1950's and 60's of stopping whatever you were doing 5 times a day to worship at the sound of a bell. A man of action, Oaten knew very well "how easy it was to lose sight of God in the push to get things done." He wrote, "In the press of living and doing, we humans are sure to forget God often. Worship would be a source of strength and a safeguard against willful [people] forgetting that they were [God's] creatures." (p. 14, Jocelyn Bell, *The Story of Five Oak: Fifty Years in the Life of an Education Centre*)

(Go and ring the bell)



This bell, which calls us while we are here to chapel and to meals, serves as a reminder that God is in the ordinary parts of our every day lives. The bell reminds us that every activity – work, eating, relationships, play – can all become sacred.

Everything can be an opportunity to connect with and encounter God.

It is difficult sometimes to see the sacred in some parts of our everyday lives. Remember Elijah. He was listening for God. He looked for God in the big, noisy and powerful things – the wind, the earthquake, the fire, but instead God came in a gentle whisper.

I Kings 19:11 tells Elijah's story:

The Lord said go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" NIV

I invite you to take some time now for reflection using the questions on your handout.

Handout: *With the bell still ringing in your ears, take some time now to remind yourself of Elijah and the need to be still in the midst of our "busyness" and take time to listen for God's voice in the midst of life.*

Think about your daily routine – your waking, your work, your quiet time, your cleaning, your volunteer time, your relationships, your meal-time, your playtime, even difficult times. Invite God to be your companion and partner in all that you do, in all of your routines.

On your own or with someone else reflect on how a normal routine part of your everyday life has been marked by a sense of God's presence or a sense of awe.

In honour of the practice of Five Oaks to take time in the midst of work to stop and be reminded of God's presence with us, let us sing *I'm Gonna Listen So God Can Use Me* (x2) as we move to our next station.

Station 3: Chapel

Earlier I mentioned that the name Five Oaks is connected to the ancient oak trees located on the property. On the official day of dedication of Five Oaks, five oak trees were planted to represent the five conferences that were supporting the lay training work of this center. In October 2004, Five Oaks' Common Life Community participants planted five new oaks at the entrance of the centre. In the Celtic tradition the ancient Oak represents deep-rooted spirituality. The chapel has three banners symbolizing different stages in the life of the oak tree.

The broken acorn with a new shoot emerging symbolizes the miracle and mystery of new life at the beginning of our spiritual journey. Mark 4: 26-29 says, "The seed that is planted in the ground at night grows and sprouts we know not how."

The full-grown tree standing by the stream represents our life-giving connection to the source of all life through strong and deep roots into scripture and relationship with God. It also represents our potential to bear good fruit in our lives. Jeremiah 17:7-8 talks about people putting down roots into God so that they can bear fruit. *Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of*

Resource Materials



drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.
NRSV

And finally, the leaves of the oak tree blown and scattered around the globe symbolize how the people who come to this place to be fed can be a source for the healing and restoration for our world. Rev. 22:2 mentions “the leaves of the tree of life that are for the healing of the nations.”

Our spiritual growth begins and ends with prayer. Let us pray together the prayer on your handout: **Creative and imaginative God**

your trees remind us of all that we can be as your people. Open our hearts now like the unfurling leaves of spring so that we can be open to the possibilities that lie beyond this day at Five Oaks – open us to the possibilities of growth, of deepening and broadening our roots, the possibilities of standing tall and of trusting that new life can sprout from our branches. Open us to the possibility of us bearing good fruit.

I invite you to take some time now for reflection using the questions on your handout.

Handout: *Close your eyes and use your imagination. Imagine what kind of tree God sees you as. Perhaps you are a sapling just getting started, sending tentative roots into the welcoming soil. Perhaps you are a tall oak, standing beside a stream, strong and resilient with roots that go deep to sustain you. Perhaps you are a broken stump sending out fresh shoots again after a difficult time. Where will you find the life-giving water you need to grow and flourish? Where will you find the sustenance essential to become the kind of tree that God wants you to be? What kind of smell will your flowers have? What kind of fruit will you produce? Hold that image in your mind's eye and let God bless your tree. Trust God to help you find the nourishment you need to be healthy and put down roots and bear good fruit.*

Remembering the centrality of prayer for spiritual growth as we gather here in the chapel where prayer takes place three times a day, let us sing *I'm Gonna Pray So God Can Use Me* (x2) as we move to our next station.

Station 4: New Hall

New Hall and Wing C were added to the main building in 1956 and were built from the material of two old buildings from Brantford Airport. New Hall was created as a place for large groups to gather for worship and large educational events. The 30 extra beds that were created above us were a bonus to Five Oaks at a time when attendance at educational events was growing.

Above us [*in the northwest corner of the room*] is the symbol of the wild goose. Although we do not immediately notice it in the corner as we enter, it is an important part of this room.



The wild goose is an ancient Celtic symbol of the Holy Spirit who flies beyond control of humanity. Because geese fly in “V” formation, the goose is also a symbol of the strength that comes when creatures work together in community. This goose flies toward the center of the room, suggesting that the spirit is at the heart of the community of a gathered people. So, as we gather in this place today, the goose above serves as a reminder that God’s spirit is guiding and empowering us. When we reflect about God’s place in our lives, when we study scripture and when we learn, plan and dream together we are being gathered by God’s spirit for faith formation.

The goose also represents the spirit’s going with us as we leave this place to return to our own communities and world with God’s life changing love.

Programming at Five Oaks today focuses on four areas: enabling people be the church; empowering people to seek justice; supporting people in all stages of life and encouraging spiritual development and renewal. This room is a place where all of these types of programs occur. Just as the goose symbol is not immediately visible as we enter the room, so it is with God’s spirit. When people gather here God’s spirit begins to move and blow invisibly within and through the gathered people – through church members learning about the life and work of the church, through those seeking ways to live out God’s justice for the

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world, for youth groups, confirmation groups and young families, through people here on retreat and for spiritual guidance. God's spirit is here among the people.

We are reminded of the powerful and mysterious day of Pentecost when God's spirit came to reside within and empower Christ's followers. Acts 2: 1-4 says "when the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit."

I invite you to take some time now to reflect on the questions in your handout.

Handout: On your own or with someone else discuss the following questions:

- Have you ever had a time when you experienced a mysterious movement or discovery within you that could only be understood as coming from a power outside yourself?

- Have you ever sensed a strength that came when you were part of a group of people working together in community?
- How do you see God's spirit moving in the community to which you belong?

In honour of the symbol of the Goose which represents how the Spirit empowers God's healing work through us in the communities to which we belong let us sing *I'm Gonna Live So God Can Use Me* (x 1).

Blessing:

We have touched stones,
heard the bell,
seen the oak growing and
discovered the goose flying.
May the Spirit that flies beyond our control
show us our call to God's healing work,
draw us into God's presence in the midst of our routine,
allow us to put down deep roots and
blow in us with power. Amen.

Personal Contribution

Our Common Life group, Tilted to the Centre, knows that over the years, I have faithfully attended Nora Savage's writing group at Five Oaks. They asked if I would contribute one of my poems to the next newsletter on their behalf. ~ Don Robinson



Looking Out the Window

Early in the morning as I sat looking out the window, on a dreary autumn day,
not knowing what lay before I let my mind wander every which way.
It didn't take long to awaken me to a movement across the way.
Oh, how I wish that red cardinal knew I wanted it to stay.
From stationary branches it flittered hither and yon, gathering a tidbit here and there.
Through the backfields of my mind came a therapy of care.
I too must move from stillness to greet my Common Life partners and share.
Into the circle of friendship I moved that day, open to what the Spirit holds sway,
knowing that the bonding of my friends will speak to me of hope in a new way.
As the day unfolded, amazingly through the dialogue, thoughts came what may,
opening new avenues of understanding and freedom for faith to lead the way.
I sat looking out the window on an early autumn day.
What more can I tell you about the nature of God's way.
One never knows what Creation holds to excite us throughout each new day.
I only know it was refreshing renewal for me to see God at such spiritual play.

~ Don Robinson