
Dialogue

Volume 7 Issue 1

Strength for the church's journey into wholeness in Christ

Feb. 2005

The subject: ***Focus on Women***

I have had the privilege of meeting with a group of women periodically since sometime last year. We talk about leadership. It is an utterly fascinating thing to do for many reasons.

For one thing, I really love women. I'm not sure how that sounds to you. (Lots of pastors have gotten into lots of trouble by "loving" women.) But I love being around women. They are different from me, and each variation on the mystery is intriguing.

So far, as we have been talking about leadership, I keep getting drawn back to Deborah, the leader of Israel celebrated in Judges, chapter 5. The women I meet with are like Deborah in some ways, and want to be more so.

I love the Song of Deborah. Sing a few bars with me to warm up:

*"In the days of Shamgar son of Anath,
in the days of Jael, the roads were abandoned;
travelers took to winding paths.
Village life ceased,
ceased until I, Deborah, arose,
arose a mother in Israel. ...
"Then the people of the LORD
went down to the city gates.
"Wake up, wake up, Deborah!
Wake up, wake up, break out in song!"*

There are a lot of Deborahs in Philadelphia, hard at work where the roads are "abandoned" after 7pm, or so, aren't there?

If we are ever going to see "village life" again in this country, and not turn completely into slaves of bureaucratic profit-making, many more Deborahs need to arise, don't they?.

As this issue moves along, we're going to touch on such things: being a woman in the world, in the church, in leadership and in Christ. As you read, I hope God will sing to you between the lines, where the love and truth are resting in the Spirit beyond the print.

— Ed.

Stories About Women In Leadership

I have never known a church that has desired to have women leaders as much as Circle of Hope. We long for a balanced leadership team. We encourage women to lead cells, to organize new Public Meetings, to speak at Public Meetings, to oversee our mission teams. The notion of women leading in a



church is not something to be taken for granted in much of the world, but at Circle it is something that we cherish and seek, respect and need as we work towards realizing the kingdom of God on earth.

To celebrate the women who lead Circle of Hope, I want to tell some of their stories. I am not trying to make a point about women who lead, nor am I attempting to differentiate female leaders from male leaders. I'm just telling stories—stories about some of the challenges that women face, how they overcome them, how God factors into their decisions to lead and to stop leading. These are stories about only a few of the amazing women of Circle of Hope. Everyone has a story to tell if you only ask.

**Amber Reeves,
on knowing when to let go**

A good leader knows when to give up

some power. Amber Reeves, Circle Thrift store manager, practiced that skill at the end of the summer, when she initiated a change in the management of the store.

Amber moved to Philadelphia a couple of years ago, got involved with Circle of Hope and soon heard talk of starting a thrift store. "I have always been into the concept of young people starting businesses, and I loved the idea and vision of the thrift store," she says. She learned more about MCC, the network which the thrift store would be a part of, and liked the idea even more.

As the store plans moved forward, Amber decided she'd like to work there. Her work experience included working in a clothing store and hair salon. Now she wanted more of a challenge. She wanted to do something that would have a broader impact. The thrift store certainly met those requirements. She applied to be the thrift store manager.

In early 2004, Amber found out that she got the job. Her duties as manager included handling the finances, managing store operations (sorting and tracking the clothes, interacting with other stores, managing the truck drivers, recruiting and overseeing volunteers) and working with customers. Jenni (Jordan) Reynolds was hired as the assistant manager.

Amber worked on a volunteer basis for a while until her full-time salary kicked in during March. She spent lots of time doing start-up activities—sorting clothes, preparing the rotation system, getting the building ready. Then the store opened in April.

"There was so much community support when we opened. Many Circle of Hope friends were among the earliest customers. It was very exciting and supportive!" Amber says.

As the customers came in the door, Amber was focused on how it looked. She wanted the store to be welcoming and to have a different atmosphere than a typical store. "That was the vision for the store," she says, "but it's

(Continued on page 2)

also just my personality. I wanted it to be homey and comfortable, not just a place to spend money."

As each month ended, the financial statements were in the red—sales were not meeting the budget. Amber was having a hard time balancing the business side with the store operations. The business end was suffering.

By the end of summer, Amber realized something had to give. She proposed to the Circle Thrift board that she could take a lower salary and they could hire someone else to oversee the business side of things. But the team soon realized that even half of Amber's salary would not be enough to hire another person. In the end, Jenni volunteered to resign her paid position and become a part of the store's leadership team. That would free up her salary for someone to come in and oversee the finances and marketing.

Once the reorganization was figured out, Dan Platt was hired to handle the thrift store's business side, like accounting and marketing. He also works in the store on Amber's days off.

With the changes in place, Amber can now focus on what she's good at and enjoys doing: store operations—creating the special atmosphere, making people feel welcome, managing the merchandise—while someone else takes care of the business end.

Amber says she and Dan are figuring out how to work together. It's different from when she and Jenni ran the store together, but Dan's strengths fill in the important gaps, and it is working well so far. "The next few months are a transitional time," she says. "Who knows what is coming next?"

**Brenda Robinson,
on balancing roles as a leader,
a mother, and a wife**

As a cell leader, worship leader, leader of Brotherly Love Urban Youth Services, wife, and mother, Brenda Robinson is one busy woman. How does she manage all of these roles? With lots of prayer and a certainty that as long as she is following God's plan, her needs will be met.

Brenda and her husband Bryan often visited Philadelphia, Bryan's hometown,

while they lived in California. Whenever they came to Philly to visit friends and family, they saw a visible and spiritual need in the city—especially for young people.

"Bryan wanted to come to Philadelphia," Brenda shares. "He kept talking about it, and I just kind of humored him." As time went on and Bryan kept talking and thinking about Philadelphia, he became more uncomfortable in California. Brenda realized that she needed to consider this calling.

"I don't look at myself as a leader," ... "I'm just doing what God wants me to do. I feel strongly that this is me, this is why God created me: to serve Him. I have no other purpose on earth beyond serving Him and doing work for the Kingdom of God. I can't separate ministry and personal feeling."

"I heard a preacher who said you will know the will of God when you are burdened by a situation. We definitely felt a burden for Philly. God placed it on my heart, too, and I was obedient to the call."

At first they were involved in Young Life in Philadelphia. Eventually they started Brotherly Love Urban Youth Services, and Brenda serves as the administrator, vice president and secretary of the organization. "I'd had years of experience with administration and the business side of things," she explains. "Since I liked to do that type of work, I took those roles on, according to my experience and ability." She does all the paperwork, works with donors, and manages the business side of the organization.

Leading at Circle of Hope has also been out of obedience to God. Brenda and Bryan liked what Circle was trying to do, and they became a part of the Northwest as it first got off the ground. As needs came up, they stepped up and answered the call of God. "We always led the church when there was no pastor." Now their leadership is formalized: Bryan is the pastor. Brenda is still a cell leader and worship team leader.

"I don't look at myself as a leader," she says. "I'm just doing what God wants me to do. I feel strongly that this is me, this is why God created me: to serve Him. I have no other purpose on earth beyond serving Him and doing work for the Kingdom of God. I can't separate ministry and personal feeling."

She makes it sound easy, but of course there are challenges. "This is a cliché, but it's true: it's hard to find a balance between what God calls you to do

and making a home with the kids," Brenda shares. The Robinsons often combine their ministry and family, and Brenda says that sons Stephen and James are a part of everything they do. "They go to conferences with us, and they often help to set up the worship space and things like that," she says. "But our life isn't all work. We also take time to do things specifically with the boys. We are mindful of balancing our time, so they don't see ministry as taking mom and dad away from them."

Spending time with Bryan is also very important for the whole family. "Our relationship has to be a strong foundation for the family," she says. To maintain their connection, they often schedule dates, and take time to be alone and develop their own relationship.

Like any person who wears five different hats depending on the time of day, sometimes Brenda feels overworked. "A few months ago, we went to California for three weeks and it was very relaxed; we were not always doing things," she says. "It was great. It helped us to realize that we could and should take more time to go on outings with the kids, more time to just enjoy each other."

Brenda is confident about all the work she does because she trusts that God is

(Continued on page 3)

Dialogue

WHY? *This quarterly journal is a gift to everyone who wishes to be a part of the ongoing dialogue we share in Christ that forms us and deepens us as a real church. Whether you just arrived or have been with us from the beginning, we want you to be part of the conversation and an informed member of the team. We hope you will work with us to build a safe place to experience and share the love of Jesus Christ. Dialogue is a crucial part of that.*

If you would like to respond to any of the articles printed, that would be great. We have never turned a response away, yet — but we reserve the right to do so.

in the center of it. "God put me and Bryan together for a purpose. It's still challenging, but our gifts are perfectly matched together."

She has thoughtful advice for others who are considering taking on leadership responsibilities: "Pray long and hard. Listen to what God is saying about your life. It doesn't matter what you think, but what God wants."

"It might seem scary, you may fear the unknown, but when you are in God's will, he'll wipe your fears away. It was tough for us at first, but God supplied all our needs, everything for the family."

**Mike Stichter,
on being in a cell led by a woman**

Mike Stichter started attending Alison Wear's cell in summer 2003. Why her cell? "She's the only person who asked me!" Mike shares. "She knew me, she came over to me one night and asked me to come to her cell. I had been around Circle for a while, and I knew about cells, but I didn't know how big of a deal they are. Once someone asked me to go to one, I figured it must be a big deal."

Mike says he likes Alison's leadership style, because it is a style he relates to. "She acts like male leaders I've known. She takes charge, gets things rolling, starts conversations, makes points, gets people talking," he says. "Also, she lets things flow as they are going and doesn't try to direct it one way or another."

When he first started to attend the cell, he didn't know people very well and he didn't say much. "Then I got more comfortable and I felt better talking. Alison knew how to get me to keep back a little so others could talk. That is a good leadership skill," he shares.

Last summer, Alison was leading a cell that had all men. When she asked what they wanted to talk about, the guys wanted to talk about "godly men." Mike says, "Alison was the only female, and she was the leader. She handled it well, leading a discussion like that. She encouraged us to share things that we weren't always comfortable sharing and she made us at ease. She let us know that there were no right or wrong answers."

Mike also respects Alison for facilitating the group's discussion without having an agenda of her own. "I feel like some women want to share their own view, rather than letting the group talk. Good leaders lead the group, rather than dominate the conversation. Alison participates

in the group, but she is not trying to represent all women. If her view is different, she shares it as that: another view."

So is leadership a male versus female thing? Does Alison just know how to lead "like a man?" Mike doesn't think so. "Different people lead in different ways, rather than being a male/female thing. When we were talking about godly men, sometimes Alison said her female perspective was different. If there was something she disagreed with, we talked about it. It was interesting to have a different viewpoint."

As Alison's cell grew, more women began to attend. There was a more balanced discussion, in terms of gender. That changed the cell, but for the better, says Mike. "The issues we talked about and the social times were different when there were more women at cell. And it was good. It was a fuller discussion with more women."

Now Alison's cell is ready to change. Mike is looking for a new cell, since his schedule won't allow him to attend Alison's. Will he go to a cell led by a man or a woman? "I don't know. I'll see who invites me, and where God takes me next."

**Alison Wear,
on leading a cell group**

Alison Wear started leading a cell in September 2002. "I was in Rod's cell and it was time to multiply. Rod said, 'I need you to lead,'" Alison says. It was not a strange request for Alison, who has been leading all kinds of small groups since she was 14. "I continue to be a cell leader because I love it so much."

Alison says she is gifted at leading, and it comes naturally. She tries to make sure everyone is involved in the group and in the conversation and she helps cell members to find a comfort level. She thinks her seminary training helps, too. "I know about matters of faith. That doesn't mean I always have an answer, but I know where to look for more information, and I have a historical perspective."

"Being a cell leader is a way of living out the vocation that I feel called to. It's how I do ministry now. I'm sorting through how God wants it to happen for me at Circle of Hope."

In the two and a half years that she has been a cell leader, Alison's cell

has usually had more men than women, and she has made a point of having a male apprentice. "I wanted to make sure that people knew it was a co-ed cell," she says. "Women and men lead differently, but I don't think that it's as important to understand those differences as it is to come up with good, balanced leadership teams."

After Alison married Jon Wear, she says her cell members wanted to talk to the couple about what a person can do to find a mate. "We love to tell our story, but we don't think it's a formula that others should follow! But it seemed like everyone thought of me as a leader in terms of marriage too... I had reached this new "level of achievement" in their eyes." Alison and Jon's openness about their relationship led into discussions about what it means to be a Christian man.

When asked if she thinks it's important to have women in leadership she replied, "It's important to have a balance of female leaders and male leaders—not just for the sake of numbers, but for accurate representation of the kingdom. Women should not be in leadership positions unless they are gifted and called. I have more to offer than estrogen. God calls me to be a leader and I have special gifts. The fact that I'm a woman is not enough."

**Megan Scott,
on hearing God say, "You are loved"**

In 2003, Megan Scott was working for a citywide program where she interacted with lots of people of all ages, but something was missing. "I wanted to be able to integrate my faith into my work, and I couldn't do it there," she says. At the same time, she was doing a master's program in conflict transformation, and she was interested in figuring out how to relate peace and justice in the world. While she pondered these ideas, a door opened.

"Pam Rowen told me that she was getting ready to step away from leading Circle Venture. I knew right away that I wanted to apply. I talked to David about it, and then I discussed it with my close friends." She applied and she got the job.

She says that the best part of being the Circle Venture Director was networking with all kinds of people in the congregation. "I loved meeting people,

helping them realize their gifts and matching them up with others who are doing something they'd like."

Some challenges came as the Circle of Hope network grew. When Circle of Hope planted the East congregation, Megan and David decided to be a part of it. "After the transition, I quickly realized that I had been getting a lot of Circle Venture work done before and after the PMs at Center City, when I could easily catch up with people about the mission teams or Circle Venture business. Once I was at the East, I found I was missing out on those regular connections with a lot of people." Suddenly the work of Circle Venture felt bigger.

Megan began wondering how the work she did with Circle Venture fit in with the church's main work, helping people to meet Jesus and discipling new followers of Christ. Circle Venture seemed like an addition to the main work of the church, and it wasn't always clear how she fit in with the rest of the church leadership.

"One big help was that I was a cell leader for much of the same time that I was the director of Circle Venture," she shares. "I really wanted to lead a cell because that is the main work of Circle of Hope. Doing both things helped me to clarify Circle Venture's role a bit."

Last June, Megan, David and Zoe moved to the neighborhood around Circle East, and the summer was filled with difficulty. They were robbed three times, a neighbor was murdered, and three other people who were important to them died within a month. Then Megan's grandmother got sick, and Megan felt called to spend time with her. Finally, Zoe began having trouble sleeping when Megan was not around.

"All of these things were making me unbalanced," Megan says. "It felt like my life became a puzzle—I had all these pieces that I kept trying to rearrange to make the picture work, but it just wouldn't fit together. Circle Venture was the only piece that I could take out."

Stepping away from leading Circle Venture was not an easy decision. "I thought about it a lot. I talked it over with my husband and my close friends. I prayed a lot," Megan shares. "Finally I went away for a long weekend to figure out what to do and I was able to spend a

full day in prayer about it all. I felt God's peace. I heard him say, 'You are loved. You are a leader. And you can step away.'"

So the Circle Venture piece of the puzzle was removed, and Megan immediately felt changes at home. "Zoe was sleeping through the night and taking long naps. I was more relaxed."

How did her role as mother and wife impact this puzzle? "The physical reality of motherhood makes women different," Megan shares. "Women bear children. We nurse children. Our presence is required with our children in a way it is not for men."

In the months since Megan stopped working for Circle Venture, she has keenly felt God's presence with her. She says that her break from leadership at Circle is temporary, and she

hopes to return to leading a cell. For now, she rests and spends time listening to God. She shares, "God keeps saying come with me, walk with me, be loved."

Jane Clinton

I can be joyful about trials that already passed because I can see them as a anchor in the cliff face I am climbing. They helped me climb up and they are helping other behind me. Will I ever come to a point when I can be joyful in the midst of the trial?

Leading in the Midst of Insecurity

I love and hate writing for the Dialogue. But, I love sharp pencils, bound journals, great pens, and my kitchen table. God uses all kinds of things to get us to meet with him. Taking time to write this article has motivated me to listen to God, to remember things he's already taught me. Participating in the ongoing dialogue at Circle of Hope helps us to keep meeting with God. And being dependent on God makes me a better leader, which is what I'm thinking and writing about.

It's hard to listen to God and to keep leading towards Him as best I can with all my insecurities demanding my attention. "Don't sit down and listen to God," they say. "Spend some more

time trying to figure us out. We are so interesting. Don't you want to spend time with us?"

I believe God has planted seeds of leadership in us all. We all lead in different ways. Put together this makes the beautiful body of Christ; a whole community loving, caring, and leading one another to our full selves with Jesus guidance, model, love, and miracle. It is God with His never ending complete love that makes these talents grow in us (1 Co 3:6). How beautiful we are when we become children of God. We shine like stars in the universe (Php 2:15).

In my own life however, I find that at times, it seems, there are places in me where the soil is too dry and hard, or too weedy for these seeds of God. I get convinced that what I have to offer is not good enough. I become overwhelmed with my own unmet desires. I get distracted by the urgent which makes me too tired emotionally to keep my soil nourished. Strong emotions named and unnamed seem to take over like big dark clouds blocking out the sun. Without the sun there seems to be no way God's beautiful seeds can grow. I forget to consider it pure joy whenever I fact trials of many kinds. I forget that the testing of my faith develops perseverance. Even though I desperately want to be mature and complete not lacking anything. Instead I doubt and I am like a wave of the sea blown and tossed by the wind.

I can be joyful about trials that already passed because I can see them as a anchor in the cliff face I am climbing. They helped me climb up and they are helping other behind me. Will I ever come to a point when I can be joyful in the midst of the trial?

At this point in my life I know what kinds of wind can capsize me. One of my capsizing winds is the wind of male authority (which is most often my husband Paul). I know he isn't my "boss," but for some reason when I'm feeling like I'm in a tiny boat on a big stormy sea, I run to Paul to save me from the big stormy sea. Now I know there are times when I desire Paul's support in a healthy way and he supports me lovingly and generously. I'm not even sure how to distinguish the healthy desire from the unhealthy one. I do know that sometimes when I go to Paul for help, I'm left bobbing in the water gasping for air. While initially I blame him for cap-

(Continued on page 5)

sizing me. I really don't think it's his fault. I actually think I'm not designed to work that way and so it doesn't work.

Okay, now that my metaphors are totally overlapping and mixing together let's see if I can describe for you how I think I'm designed. I feel like I'm a tiny boat on a big stormy sea, but I'm actually not. If I sit for a while without searching around for a great big Male authority wind to blow me over, the sea of my feelings will eventually recede. (Finding other women to sit with me has been very helpful). Then I can go about tending to my soil so God's seeds have a fertile place to grow.

Calling a friend when in the midst of a stormy sea is so exposing. Describing the storm to an empathetic ear helps calm the sea. In the last few years with my therapist's encouragement I have learned to depend on my sisters' listening in times of need. So it was very surprising to me several months ago when I was sharing with Jane about how my cell was in transition. I said, "I feel like if I don't get more passion about this cell, it's going to die." She replied, "yes, it will." Jane taught me in that instant that sometimes it's important to sit with a person in their sorrow and sometimes it's important to lead them out of it.

I have found it helpful to spend time thinking about what I want to do with my time without judging every thought. What is God doing around me that I would really like to be a part of? In order to do this I need to plan some quiet alone time to listen to and talk with God. I enjoy discovering who God is making me to be. If I don't do this, I find myself filling my time with meeting the demands of others, real and perceived.

Acknowledging our wants can also be very painful. In the broken world we live in some wants shouldn't be met, some can't be met, and some may be met but we have to wait. It's a struggle to figure out if the needs are real or simply camouflaging a deeper longing. If we aren't aware of our wants they will drive us unconsciously. They will get in the way of us deeply knowing we are the beloved of God. When God sorrows with us, our sorrows are soothed. When God rejoices with us, our joys increase. If we aren't confident of God's love for us our own subconscious wants and the wants of others drive our leading and not God.

I want to be a leader who knows unmet desires and is comfortable quiet, and strong in waiting for His kingdom to come. I want to be a leader who is passionate

and fiery about the things God is passionate about.

Leaders have to make decisions. It's so hard for me to make decisions. This morning I specifically asked the Lord to help be courageous and make decisions throughout the day. Five minutes later when Paul asked me what I wanted for breakfast I replied, "pancakes or french toast, but if you want cereal we can have cereal, what do you want?" Yikes! Do I have problems with decision making! I either want to please everyone (which is impossible), or have someone else (who I grant more authority than I give myself) make the decision. I do this most often with Paul because I'm married to him. I'm finding that as I learn who I am in Christ apart from Paul, as I learn to relate to him as Tracey-God-Beloved instead of Tracey-who-reacts-to-please-Paul. I am becoming a better leader. More and more I am able to say "hey, let's go this way . . . it's going to be great." It may not be the best way to get where we are going, but if we all go this way we will be going together.

Sometimes our soil needs to lay fallow. Desiring the discipline to carve out space and time for God is wonderful. Beating yourself up for not managing to do it is not. I set my alarm for 6:20 in the hopes that it will go off before Kofi wakes up and that it won't wake Kofi up, so that I will have a few minutes to spend with God reading, praying, journaling. If I'm up several times that night caring for Kofi, I don't get up at 6:20. Sometimes I can find time for God somewhere else in the day, most times I end up hopefully meeting him throughout the day. It's taken me years, and I still struggle with it occasionally, but I just don't think it's helpful to be angry with myself for missing time with God. It's better to miss the time with God and join him even more joyfully the next time.

I was reading my 2003 journal this morning. It amazes me how these themes keep weaving through my life. I find it encouraging, so I'm going to conclude this article with those thoughts. From January 31, 2003, "Free me from social compulsions O Lord, I am yours. Help me move from compulsion to reflection. From forced march to joyful dance. Solitude does not renew us or recharge us. It does more. It transforms us."

Tracey Kohl

On the Feminine Side of God

I'm not sure how to talk about the feminine side of God, but we seem to need to do that. We have packed "Him" with all sorts of earthbound, male-dominated, repressive connotations for so long that God needs to be called "Her."

I'm not sure what to do. When talking about how God is also "feminine," people wax metaphysical or sink to political. They often have an ax to grind. They have wrongs to right. They have projections to infect on their listener. I don't really have that kind of thing to do. I mostly just have a sadness to report over the fact that there is such a topic.

To need to talk about the feminine side of God seems like a failure already, like femininity needs defending, as if being a woman is an "issue" that needs a "policy." I know people reading this may be able to suggest a few policies. But, again, it is too bad they might feel the need.

All I seem to be able to come up with is one Bible picture for God that is obviously feminine that moves me to understand that God is beyond the divisions that have come between the genders.

The first rendition of this picture is in the account of the creation:

*Now the earth was formless
and empty,
darkness was over the surface of the
deep,
and the Spirit of God was hovering over
the waters.
And God said, "Let there be light," and
there was light.
(Gen. 1:2-3)*

In this story, God is shown "brooding" (so the word has been inter-

preted) over the waters, like the earth is about to be hatched. God is like a mother bird. Does that mean God is not like a lion? No. It means God is the mother of bird-ness and lion-ness and me. God is a birth-er.

In my relationship with God I rely on this birthing. At one point in my spiritual development, I had a series of images during my prayer. For many days I was lead to a tunnel through a mountain that had ineffable "monsters" in it that waved in the dark like translucent cilia. I was horrified. I felt compelled to go through, pushed, even. I remember, after many tries, how I popped into the light. At that moment, I definitely sensed that God had birthed me into another era of my development.

The fact that I experienced God like that might go to show that God has a feminine side. I wish that did not need to be proven. If we are all created in the image of God, then God must have all the qualities that make us up. We are male and female. Our complementary genders are a creative wonder, not a matter for division and competition.

Another picture of God is at the recreation. Jesus is looking over the heart of Israel before his last week.

*"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem,
you who kill the prophets and stone those
sent to you,
how often I have longed to gather your
children together,
as a hen gathers her chicks under her
wings,
but you were not willing.
Look, your house is left to you desolate."
(Matthew 23:37-38)*

The original egg has reproduced into many scattering chicks. God comes as Jesus to gather us like a hen. God is like a determined, dutiful, passionate mother hen longing to protect her chicks, to gather them, to keep them warm, to protect what she has borne, to preserve another generation from destruction. Does that mean God is not like a swarm of locusts? No. It means God longs to recreate, to enfold warmly, to embrace and comfort. God feels the loss of us.

I am willing to be under God's wings. There is a song that we sing that says: "Hold me, Lord, in your arms. Touch me with your love." I am nestled in many ways by God, but the main way I picture such

an embrace in my imagination is being held by mother. At times, I wrap my arms around myself and it is like God is my lover. Even as I write that, I feel the protest rising in me that was planted by the austere, overly-male Christian culture that has been laid on me. But as a Jesus-follower, I can't overlook that the Son of God is that same mother bird that was present at creation.

Are there injustices that need to be righted? Yes. Are there divisions that need to be healed? Yes. Have we elevated maleness and denigrated femaleness? Yes. Should we stop calling God "Him" so it will all get better? Often. But rather than fix all the problems (how male-ish!) I would rather rest in the picture of God as God is presented to me. God is beyond male or female and more deeply both than I understand. So are you. Is it possible for us to appreciate that? Or do we really need to talk it through? Can the women lead us to see it and be this feminine side of God, too? Or will they be forever waiting His permission?

One woman's response after reading Rod's thoughts:

In our history within the male dominated culture of the Christian Church and Western Society that Rod references in his thoughts above, women have, unfortunately, been left out of the dialogue in a variety of ways. In my life, I've experienced being told I couldn't teach because I am a woman, that I when I spoke my mind and influenced a group as a leader, that meant that I was not honoring God or my husband, and that I was not really a very good speaker — too emotional, you know. I've had people question my ability as a "good mother" because of my passion to lead in controversial areas and I've felt excluded from the company of women at times because I like talking about ideas and forming plans. At different points along this journey I have felt these experiences along a continuum from painful to silly. But I have rarely es-

caped the sting of exclusion when it hits.

Rod's pictures of God, drawn from scripture and from his own prayer life, resonate with my own. I have found great comfort and healing in knowing God as Mother in the Bible and in my own prayer life as well. One key element that I believe we need to be mindful of at Circle of Hope is how to effectively address this issue of inclusion. I would assert that meeting God as your Mother will open the way to a deeper, richer, fully relationship with God whether you are male or female. So including women in every area of our life together and including feminine understandings of God and of God's ways with us is vitally important. A number of years ago as I struggled with my own internalized devaluing of the feminine in my life, I began to have

a number of images in prayer that revealed how oppressive and limiting the male domination of my experience of God had been in my life. As I sat silently before God, She mothered me and showed me the paralysis I lived in as a result of my narrow view of my own gifts and calling. It was at this time that I read through Ephesians again and was brought to my knees when I came to 1:13:

"And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation."

I relished that inclusion in Christ as it applied to my feminine reflection of God's goodness in the world. It wasn't too much later that I was reading Galatians again and marveled at how I had missed its message in my heart. 3:26:

"You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized in Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ."

I felt healed by those words. When it comes to being in Christ, I am a son, no longer excluded by my gender.

(Continued on page 7)

As I've studied the New Testament over the years, I've been drawn repeatedly to see our Jesus as the revolutionary leader of women into new roles as co-nurturers with Christ — nurturers of the church and of the world. We are included in all the work, the responsibility, and the joy of living out the gospel of peace, a gospel that reconciles across the many variations of humanity that God has created.

As I've studied the New Testament over the years, I've been drawn repeatedly to see our Jesus as the revolutionary Leader of women into new roles as co-nurturers with Christ — nurturers of the church and of the world. We are included in all the work, the responsibility, and the joy of living out the gospel of peace, a gospel that reconciles across the many variations of humanity that God has created. As with all differences, gender can become our strength as we love the diversity of creation and allow Christ alone to be our unity, or gender differences can become our weakness as we allow division to separate us and skew our valuing of one over another. Rod used the word complementary in his thoughts above. That is the right word, I believe. It requires that both men and women embrace our roles as co-bearers of God's image in our broken world.

Rod and Gwen White

Readers Respond

Sabbath Economics

By Mimi Pukuma

As I read the November issue of the Dialogue and in particular the article "The Bible and Debt," I thought of a class I recently took called "The Economy of God." Some of the basic tenets of the economy of God we discussed in the class were: the Earth is the Lord's, abundance not scarcity, and economy within covenantal community relationships. To more fully understand these ideas, we began the class studying the story of the Manna and Quail in Exodus 16.

After God freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, they were fugitive slaves facing the unknown in the midst of the desert. Their basic economic concern was how to keep from starving. Here God outlined the Sabbath econ-

omy, which was based on abundance and enough. God instructed the Israelites to collect enough manna and quail for each member of the family. They were not to hoard more than they needed nor were they to save any for the next day. They quickly found out that saved food rotted by the next day.

He continued to reveal to the Israelites this other way of living. Found both in Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15, every 7th year, the Sabbath Year, they were to let the land rest, cancel all debt and let slaves and hired persons go. God knew the nature of fallen human beings. He recognized that some would succeed, some would fail, some would hoard and some would suffer. He allowed for humans to succeed and fail at their own hands, but he also instructed humans to correct their communities at specific intervals by dismantling the structures of stratified wealth and power so there would be enough for everyone. Every 50th year was the year of Jubilee. During this year, communities were to be corrected again. Land was to be redistributed and given back to those who lost it. Slaves were to be released and debt was to be deconstructed.

As the world approached the latest millennium, a global movement emerged called Jubilee 2000. It was made up of people from northern and southern, "first world" and "third world" countries, calling on the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and economically rich countries to cancel the unpayable, international debts of the poorest "third world" countries, based on the tradition of Jubilee from the Bible and Torah.

The economic complexities of how this debt has accumulated are many, cumbersome and filled with injustice. You can find a lot of information about it at www.jubileeusa.org and at www.jubilee2000uk.org.

What has resulted is that economically poor countries are forced to divert money from education, healthcare, and other social needs in their communities, as stipulated by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund in order to repay the interest on their loans, which has skyrocketed in the last few years.

- Nigeria had a loan of \$5 billion. It paid \$16 billion to date and still owes another \$32 billion due to interest.

- Between \$7.5 and \$15 billion is needed annually to fight HIV/AIDS in

Africa each year. Yet, Africa pays out \$13.5 billion in debt service every year.

- Debt slavery is foreign aid in reverse – for every dollar sent to the poorest counties in aid, \$1.30 flows back to lenders in debt service.

After four years of organizing, the Jubilee 2000 campaign gathered 24 million signatures calling for debt relief. By the millennium, leaders committed to writing off \$100 billion of poor country debt. Some marked successes were achieved. The number of children attending primary school in Uganda doubled after they received debt cancellations. Mozambique had a \$67 million reduction in repayments, which allowed it to spend money on housing and hospitals.

The results are exciting and inspiring, but there is still much more that needs to be done. The United States has enormous influence with international creditors and banks. As American citizens we can continue to call upon our government to advocate for debt cancellation.

Although the world has fallen quite short of the kind of economy God instructed, this is a way for us as Christians to follow the tradition of Jubilee and to help brothers and sisters who are oppressed by the yoke of poverty throughout the world. In doing so, we can work to reconcile ourselves to each other and God.

For more information check out:

Goal Check

(Continued from page 8)

Include administrative duties previously performed by Circle Venture Director in a new Network administrator position.

The Administrative Coordinator position has received applicants. We look forward to hiring someone!

Help the Network develop more and deeper relationships with partners in the rest of the Church

We have not worked specifically on this goal yet.

Sponsor the tsunami rebuilding project in February and March

Any money raised by the congregations above what was budgeted for February and March will be given to MCC's tsunami relief fund.

Goal Check *Jan-Feb. 2005*

This is a regular feature of this publication. We want everyone to have some facts so we can have authentic dialogue! We adopted these goals in January of 2005. Every quarter we evaluate our progress toward meeting them.

Network

Encourage our focus on racial reconciliation

Two congregations focused on New Humanity month. Our Damascus Road Team sponsored antiracism training and a documentary series. We had our first Hour for Reconciliation.

Create a secure environment for making disciples

Bryan Robinson began full-time service as Pastor. We began the search for an Administrative Coordinator.

Increase the number of Cells and Cell Leaders by at least 50%

We had 24 cells at the end of December. We have 29 now.

Prepare to plant another congregation in two years

Growth at NW and E PMs bodes well. New covenant members give us increased gravity. Leadership mentoring is occurring.

Center City

Experience a change in how we engage in our main mission

A new arts team got going. We held our first AM PM for children and parents.

Deepen our reliance on miracles

People have been praying and receiving "the impossible" all month! We have ventured into areas that require God to succeed.

Deal with our eviction

The Next Building Team worked like crazy and came up with success in every area of their search.

Diversify racially and otherwise

We seem to have found a place to meet in a more diverse neighborhood.

Care for children in more deliberate, creative ways

Our communication among the teams and leaders has improved.

Unleash our gifted teachers in new ways

We have embarked on a season of teaching about spiritual disciplines. "Race the Power of Illusion" was offered.

Support Circle Counseling as it begins its next era

Dan K. has been especially helpful in the troubles connected to keeping the 4617 Woodland Ave. project going.

Northwest

Continue to develop our public meeting so that it reflects the diverse community served.

Tiffany King has been especially useful in developing the worship music.

Find new ways to connect with and serve youth and families

Through the BLUYS basketball league and the Spot, through service to G'town High in Safe Streets program and through PMs and Cells this is happening.

Commit to actively addressing social issues in surrounding community

Sponsoring the Safe Streets initiative has gotten us deeply involved.

Promote church growth

This is happening. There are 65 regular attenders, now.

East

Raise up cells with a mission: places for discipling those already connected as well as for connecting with people beyond our normal boundaries

New cells are being formed with people who are disconnected from Jesus. and the church-meeting from people's homes to bars to Temple's campus! Holly, Sarah, and Alison gave birth to cells in the Kensington/Fishtown area.

Find ways to connect with the next generation, indigenous to the Kensington/Fishtown/Northern Liberties areas

We have found some volunteer opportunities with the St. Francis Inn, and Covenant House's outreach center. Our Super Bowl Party with a Purpose and free movie nights have been good steps to meet people.

Actively participate in the work of racial reconciliation and dismantling systemic racism (personally, congregationally, as a network, and globally)

We had a quiet yet strong turnout for the first meeting to invade the "most segregated hour of the week." We had 7 people participate in the Damascus Road Anti-Racist Analysis Training in Feb.

Continue to grow and develop diverse PMs

Our PM Team Leaders have really done a tremendous job trying to keep our worship diverse in language, style, use of art, use of personal space, use of body language.

Circle Venture

Engage our network people and offer regular and varied ways for them to be involved in expressing compassion.

The Damascus Road team recently completed its first film series on the issue of racial reconciliation and several of our network members are participating in the Damascus Road training from Feb. 11-13. Members of our developing Farm Team presented some of their ideas and knowledge to the East congregation.

Raise \$30,000.

We are in the planning stages of creating a CD-Rom and/or DVD of the mission teams' work in the next year to distribute to churches and possible donors during the last fiscal year quarter.

Hurl stones at three select "Goliaths": healthy drinking water, Philadelphia's education needs and racial reconciliation.

The Frederick Douglass Team is recreating itself. Instead of working with the children in the Frederick Douglass school, the team will be supporting teachers in the network. The money being sent to the MCC tsunami relief fund will be targeted to provide healthy drinking water. The Damascus Road Team sponsored a film series dealing with racial reconciliation and several people from our network participated in a training.

Return Circle Venture Leadership Team to its roots and provide more opportunity for mission teams to participate in decision-making.

Our first quarterly Leadership Team meeting will be held in March. The Core Team is meeting monthly and sending their minutes to the mission team leaders.

(Continued on page 7)