
Dialogue

Volume 2 Issue 4 *Strength for the church's journey into wholeness in Christ* October 2000

The subject: The Next Generation

One of my newer friends heard our mission statement and loved it:

We build the church for the next generation
by the power of the Holy Spirit
Multiplying cells that are authentic expressions of life in Christ
Forming congregations as diverse as the kingdom of God
Constructing a reconciling network
To bring hope to the challenges of 21st century urban life.

But when he had a little more time to hear others talk about the statement, he decided he didn't understand what it meant. He didn't realize that when we say "next generation" we are mainly talking about AGE. When we founded Circle of Hope, we thought we could provide an opportunity to the 133,000 or so people from 18-35 who live within three miles of Tenth and Locust. We were under the impression (and rightly so) that those people, in general, are not part of the church of Jesus Christ. So there is lots of room in Philadelphia for MANY new congregations for those people. We aren't exclusively about one age group, but if you look around at our public meetings, you'll notice we have basically hit our target. The previous and the *next* "next generation" are among us, but we are primarily just who we set out to be: a church for the next generation following those domineering "baby boomers."

What our friend thought before he got into more dialogue was that we are a "next generation" church. He thought that meant we are like an upgrade in one's computer program, or the next level of advancement in a machine. That would make us an improvement over the previous model of church. This sounds pretty good to us, too. It is true that we are "not your mother's church" -- and we make *no* effort to appeal to grandfather. We are ourselves, in Philly, today, trying to face the challenges of what's next by the power of the Holy Spirit. The



fact that we are a "cell church" is, hopefully, an improvement over the paradigm of the past that was locked into buildings and bureaucracy. The largest and maybe the most exciting churches in the world are cell churches. They are in Seoul, Bogota and Abidjan, but we aren't too proud to learn from whoever is moving with the Spirit of God. So that does make us part of the reformation in the church that is sweeping over the world these days, in response to changing times. We are truly "next generation" in that way.

So, as it turns out, both ideas are probably accurate ways to describe us. In every generation, it is the young who usually embrace the next thing God is doing in the world. We rely on the fact that God has gathered together a group of passionate, searching, flexible, thought-

ful and determined young people AGAIN and is knitting them together, growing them up and deploying them to form the latest rendition of his church. It is an experiment. It is not always evident what will become of it. Some people aren't sure it will "work." But it is real, it is us, it has an amazing potential to keep being a Circle of Hope.

In that spirit, this issue brings up the subject of "the next generation." What is it like to be them? What is it like to love them and hope for them? What is it like to serve them with the changeless truth in and from Jesus? — Ed

It was September 1997, my sabbatical year, when the Lord Why I Am Planting A New Church for the Next Generation

moved deeper into my world and forever changed my outlook on life. I was standing on a dock at Sandy Cove, Maryland. My arms were outstretched as to take in the wind that was blowing forcefully upon my body. The wind on that day serves as a great metaphor. Personally, it was a symbol of God's renewing work in my life, calling me out of my codependent lifestyle and ministry. I was ready for change. I was ready to help others experience the liberation that

(Continued on page 2)

(Continued from page 1)

comes when God grabs hold of a tired old Christian and refreshes him with the Holy Spirit. I went back to my congregation with renewed vigor.

Around the same time, my eyes were being opened to the fact that the church was losing the next generation. Men and women in their 20's were leaving the traditional church in droves. They were still interested in God, but not the church. My heart was filled with compassion as I began to accept the new calling to make Jesus Christ relevant to the next generation. I went back to my church with so much excitement and expectation for the future.

As I shared my ideas for a new church for the next generation, my excitement was met with great suspicion. I spent the next three years trying to convince the church

*1 Not to us, O LORD, not to us
but to your name be the glory,
because of your love and faithful-
ness.*

*2 Why do the nations say,
"Where is their God?"*

*3 Our God is in heaven;
he does whatever pleases him.*

Psalm 115

that it had no other choice if it desired to be relevant in the future. In the end, a prophet has no honor in his own town, and I had to say a painful goodbye. I was unable to tear down the fear that so many have of change.

This leads me back to the metaphor of the wind. There is a forceful wind of change sweeping across our society. According to many experts, our society reinvents itself every four years. Change is now the norm. And what is the church's response? Defensiveness. Suspicion. Hostility. This is as unfortunate as it is understandable. We all want some stability in our lives, but unfortunately we are sacrificing the mission of the church for the stability we crave.

True stability can only be found in the person of Jesus and the church he is building. According to Scripture, nothing can prevail against this church (Matt. 16:18). I think that truth needs to be properly understood. Nothing can prevail against the church, as *God* knows it. The church as *we* know it is up for grabs. It becomes important at this point to listen in prayer to what God wants for his church as it engages the next generation. This prevents us from imposing our traditions, feelings, and thoughts onto God. For centuries, we have been trying to tame the wild and passionate God with our definition of church, but to no avail. "Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him (Psalm 115:3)."

In the end, I am planting a new church for a new generation because of the truth found in Psalm 115:3. I love the fact that I can't figure out God. And the more I am in relationship with him, the more I become the same way. It holds true for us as a church, too. The Apostle John describes it as one of the main characteristics of our new life in the Spirit: "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit (John 3:8)." If we are born of the Spirit, one cannot tell where we come from or where we are going. Here's where the imagery of the wind takes on profound meaning. The wind symbolizes the Spirit-filled church, the most powerful change agent in society. We take on the mysterious qualities of our God and produce change as we move through this world.

Mystery is exactly what the next generation is looking for in God and the church. The 20 something crowd has become bored with the old church with its formulas and rules for life. Mystery, however, connects deeply

with its hungry soul. So the more mysterious we become by following God, the more we can connect with our culture. God himself has given us this new calling. It flows directly from his character and meets a new generation at its point of need. The challenge before us at Circle of Hope is to embrace the call and to reach out to the people around us, regardless of its cost to our comfort and tradition.

Tim Bathurst

In what follows, Jonathan's reflection on his spiritual choices reflects the cultural and philosophi-

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 explore and express the love of Jesus Christ. Dialogue is a crucial part of that. — *Rod White, editor.*

Also in this issue: a continuing development. People responded to last quarter's issue with writings of their own! — JUST WHAT WE WANTED! As always, the *DIALOGUE* is just that — not a pronouncement from the authorities, just a community in Christ trying to stay functional through healthy conversation.

cal climate of the next generation.

—Ed.

This is a bad introduction, this isn't really me, I'm not normally like this. Like when you met that person last week, and everything you were saying was just completely dry, made you come across

Bulimic Buddha

as a complete dim-wit, and there was that small voice in the back of your head which was screaming, "This isn't really me! I'm actually a fun and interesting person!" But to no avail. They left you, and you cursed yourself for failing to live up to the ideal which you know you really represent. So that's me, writing this, telling you that this isn't really me, I'm normally extremely respectful of another's spiritual practices, in fact, view other religions as a wonderful part of fallen humanity's beautiful efforts to connect with each other... I would never, ever, ever, under any other circumstances, even think to visit another religious institution, and then report back to my so-called Christian brothers and sisters, as though I had gone undercover or something, like a spy, you know, thus undermining my own sincerity with which I sought out avenues of experiencing life...

Okay. No one has any clue what I'm talking about here. Look, last Sunday I had the privilege of sitting in on a service of Scientologists, and I hate the idea of talking about them now "behind their back," which was not my intention at all, but...

Okay. I'll start at the beginning. Once upon a time, while riding my bike one hot summer afternoon, I passed by a sign which advertised, "Come inside for a free personality evaluation!" Since I had nothing pressing, I stopped. So I walked into this building, not knowing what it was or what it was about... until I saw the face of L. Ron Hubbard plastered everywhere, and I thought to myself, "Oh..." and I said to the clean-shaven yuppie receptionist, "Hi, could I take a free personality test please?" And he smiles, and he says, "Why, yes you can," handing me a two page questionnaire, a freshly-sharpened number 2 pencil, and directing me to a relaxing corner of the potted plant lounge.

200+ questions. Yes, No or Maybe. Questions like, "Does life ever seem unreal or dreamlike to you?" "Do you spend time thinking about death?" "Do you rarely talk about people behind their

back?" "Do you offer help to people even when they don't ask for it?" "Could someone trust you with a secret?" "Do you smile often?" "Do you try and encourage laughter in others?" "Do past traumas haunt you?" Etc. ad nauseum. Yes, No. Maybe.

And as I'm answering these questions, I began to feel very proud of myself. "No I don't talk about people behind their back!" "Yes, I do help people out!" "Yes, I do smile!" And I realized, what a self-serving thing taking this questionnaire is. Filling it out made me feel positively good about myself, and I began to imagine the Scientologists looking at my answers, my test results, and realizing that I was a truly enlightened person, that they should be learning from me and not vice versa... Okay, so I'm not always the most humble person in the world, but these were the thoughts I was having, in my egocen-

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tric way: like Kerouac declared:

I am the perfect man,
The Buddha of this world!

Thanks Jack. And I turned in my personality evaluation, smiling, self-actualized, enlightened, and the receptionist told me he'd run it through their computer, and then someone would go over it with me to explain the results. But it would take a while, and in the meantime, their Sunday service was beginning, so why don't I just check it out? So I did.., and I won't get into what happened up there, what I saw, and I don't want to come across as being judgmental here.., but the point of this tale is that afterwards I sat in the minister's office, and she came in, smiling, holding my test results, introducing herself to me, chatting with me, and then finally showing me where I scored personality-wise. The scale ran from minus 100 to 100. From 30 points to 100 points was "Happy," the state

desirable. From negative 20 to positive 30 points was the range where the average person ranks, and anything below minus 20 was considered an unacceptable state, and "attention urgent." She explained this to me, egocentric me, this nice lady in the office did.

I scored a minus 98.

A little mark at the very bottom of the page.

A bare two points from the lowest possible rating, from the deepest, darkest depths of depression. Minus 98. As though I was a pill-popping, Sylvia Plath-reading, suicidal case.

My spirit deflated. The Buddha went on a crash diet; On The Road went In The Ditch. I looked at the little mark at the bottom of the page, next to the number —98.

This nice lady wanted to talk with me about why I was so depressed, why I hated myself so much, why I resented humanity. "Uh..." I mumbled, "I'm actually, uh, pretty happy most of the time."

"Uh-huh." She smiled at me. The way you smile at a handicapped person who says "I can open the door myself."

"I'm a pretty happy person," I had told her, and beneath her smile was the condescending: "There's no need for denial, you're amongst friends here."

-98!

"We can talk about this," she said. "Tell me what you want out of life."

"Uh..."

Question 64: "Does life ever seem unreal or dreamlike to you?" With my newly sharpened Number 2 pencil. I had blackened in YES.

There are so many moments in life, when being witnessed to by a street person, when you have feelings for a friend beyond friendship, when the music hits you upside the spirit... Dream-like is the only way to describe it. It fills me to feel connected to that side of life.

And there, in her office, across from her, looking into her caring, sympathetic eyes, life became a dream, and I said, "Uh."

"What do you know about Scientology?" she asked.

And I left. I shook her hand, said Thankyouverymuch, waved at the yuppie in the lobby, and left their church.

If I were a different type of person, I would write about how obviously screwed up these Scientologists are, what an idiot that lady was, and how dare they try to suggest to me that I'm anything but filled with the joy of

living.

But...

Because I am the person I am, because there's no such thing (in my opinion) as a single moment of salvation, of baptism, of enlightenment, but because it's an endless cycle, life from death, flight from fallenness, again and again, hitting the depths of loathing and then pulling the pieces together, then back again, over and over, because that's the way life goes, the way humanity is, it makes me wonder...

On one hand we are told to be happy and smiling and filled with the joy of the Spirit, of Life, filled with love, an over pouring vessel of love...

And on the other hand, we are told to fear the LORD our God because we are wicked and miserable and deserve to be cast into hellfire and little demons with pitchforks, sinners in the hands of an angry God, living in a fallen, Satan-spawned world with comes closer to total sadism and depravity every second, that try as we might, we can never ever be Christ-like, because He alone was blameless.

Christ led by example, while simultaneously rubbing our noses in how imperfect we were.

I forget this basic contradiction in Christianity, this basic contradiction which makes Christianity out to be more of a world-view than as a mere religion...

(A religion is like an arranged marriage. You say the vows, have ten children, and that's that.)

(A world-view is like being a heterosexual guy and living with a woman who is kind of just a friend and sometimes a lover, and there's kind of a commitment but not really because you can both see other people if you want to, and besides, you're just friends, and sometimes you hate each other, and other times you sit and watch television together and that's it, and sometimes you're in love, but it keeps going up and down and around, and you're not really sure what it is, just how it feels inside, and you know inside that there's a commitment, maybe, but really they're just a friend who happens to be a woman who happens to share your bed.)

Anyways... where was I? Oh yeah, little demons with pitchforks... Scientology.

So you forget all the confusion and complexity underlying the life we live and the world we live in, life becomes a beautiful dream because you're "saved," and you just want to be everyone's friend, in accordance with WWJD. We must save

the Scientologists!

(something akin to saving the whales and the baby seals)

And then the Scientologists look at you, and say, "You're not so great. You scored a minus 98 on our happiness test. You're horrible and diseased and depressed."

"No we're not!" you say.

But... isn't part of our whole world-view the fact that we're wicked and sinful? Isn't that why we're Christians in the first place?

Oh yeah.

So I didn't write this article to judge (though I know it sounded that way, and I don't apologize), or to poke fun (though I did make fun of them ruthlessly later that afternoon, and have the personality results hanging on my fridge), but just simply to point out, isn't it absolutely beautiful how the Scientologists likewise recognize that

...life from death, flight from fallenness, again and again, hitting the depths of loathing and then pulling the pieces together, then back again, over and over, because that's the way life goes, the way humanity is, it makes me wonder...

before there can be any healing, any salvation, we must come to grips with our own sinfulness, that life isn't just a song and a dance? The woman in the office, while being smug and condescending, was also trying to break me of my afore-mentioned egotism, so that L. Ron Hubbard could pick up the pieces, and give me their brand * of re-birth.

That's all I wanted to say, that was my point. It's a good thing to be happy, to smile, to be friends with everyone everywhere. But at the same time, I stop what I'm doing, I feel life becoming a dream, and, as Rod reminded us a few weeks ago, it knocks me like a sledgehammer, a terrible sledgehammer, bringing on the cycle of re-birth from death...

"Lord, forgive me a sinner." I am not the perfect man. I am not the Buddha of this world.

Um, so that's the story I wanted to tell you. About me and the Scientolo-

gists last Sunday.

Lord, forgive me a sinner. Me. I'm a sinner. Jesus.

Okay bye.

Jonathan Scovner

* *Scientology is, as far as I know, the only religion that is trademarked.*

We at the Circle of Hope are intentional about connecting the next generation with Jesus and his body on earth. Many of us are vitally concerned with the NEXT next generation of kids in our city. A group gathered on September 27th in Center City called out by Deb Valentine and I to begin dialogue about connecting with and advocating for children. I was excited to see all that we are doing throughout the city to

Circle of Hope's Mission to Kids

love kids and help them in their journey to adulthood and wholeness in Christ. We are fulfilling our mission to meet the urban challenges of the 21st century. Here are some stories to help us reflect on our mission to kids.

Karen Kauffman had many great stories as a 6th grade teacher at Gillespie Middle School in North Philly. One was about her conflict resolution class she led last year. Karen taught non-violent methods of conflict resolution to her 6th graders, but wondered if it had any affect. She was overjoyed when she heard that some of her students intervened with two students and stressed alternatives to fighting. This was miraculous as fighting is such an often-used solution to problems. We began to ask, How can we teach peace in a violent world where non-violent alternatives are not considered?

This led Shelley Tyson to talk about how she has struggled to sift through the differences in values

between herself and her high school students. Shelley grew up in rural, white Lancaster County Pennsylvania and has been working with (primarily) African-American inner-city teens for a few years at William Penn High School. Some have heavy interest in things other than education. This is not surprising for a teen, but when some of those things include having a reputation as a gangster, problems arise. Shelley has found herself stuck many times, but appreciated the chance to lay out her concerns and get some different perspectives. Her story led us to think, How can Jesus break down the walls that divide us? walls of race, culture, age?

Communication between students

These are just some of the stories that informed our discussion on our mission to the NEXT next generation. We discovered that right in the midst of our church were people who can help us along our way to fulfilling our mission to love and serve kids.

and teachers, and kids and adults is a problem that is not discussed very often. Philadelphia has large populations of Spanish-speaking people, Cambodians and Laotians, many of whom do not speak English as a first language. Some of our teachers have experienced children in their classes who spoke no English! Compound this with the large numbers of illiterate children in Philly. Since our culture is rooted in the written word, this can make communication a huge mountain to climb. I am working with two brothers and their sister--all teens--who are illiterate, and whose parents and grandparents are also illiterate. I have returned to the basics of our language to help these friends learn, and, I hope, graduate high school. Our calling seemed to be clear, Let's connect with kids to help them read!

Bryan Robinson shared with the group about his life in Germantown.

He grew up there and has been working with youth for several years. Bryan's relational ministry has led him to long-term relationships with a variety of young men and women. He and Brenda (his wife) act as mentors to many of these young folks, and he expressed a desire to find more adult partners to develop relationships with youth. God is leading our Northwest congregation to connect with youth, and Bryan is a vital person in this ministry.

All our discussion around the needs and problems with kids in their schools led Deb to share her vision for an alternative school in Philadelphia. Her years of working with kids and researching alternative education has led her to look for partners in developing a ministry to children, specifically in West Philly. She wants to continue her efforts in mentoring and teaching children, and is looking for people and resources to help.

These are just some of the stories that informed our discussion on our mission to the NEXT next generation. We discovered that right in the midst of our church were people who can help us along our way to fulfilling our mission to love and serve kids. Here are a few of those people and places:

1. Karen Kauffman is looking for artists to help her 6th graders learn art and dance.

2. Shelley Tyson's and Bryan Robinson's high school students need adults to simply spend time developing relationships with them. These can perhaps turn into mentoring and advocating relationships.

3. Deb Valentine has a vision for an alternative school that can connect kids with Christ and equip them with the tools they need to be servants in the world. She needs partners and resources.

4. I (Chris Petersen) am looking for one or two people to help me mentor some teen friends who can not read.

Stay tuned for another dialogue

on our mission to the NEXT next generation!

Chris Petersen

Responses to the Last Dialogue

Our discussion about sex and marriage continues. Perhaps we should just institute the permanent "sex column." It is a very important aspect of our lives.

Responses to the *Dialogue* are received by the editor (Rod White). So far, all have been printed, regardless. If your response is not printed, you'll be told why. We are going for open, constructive dialogue that advances our common and individual lives in Christ. This quarterly is "strength for the church's journey into wholeness in Christ." We'd love to hear from you.

Note: if you don't choose a title, one will be supplied, as in Paul's case.

Responses in the last Dialogue sprang from a previous Dialogue as this one springs from the most recent. I guess the Dialogue is in-fact a dialogue — how about that!

Two separate responses in the last Dialogue stated that the possibility exists for a loving healthy sexual relationship outside of marriage. Sexual intimacy (intercourse) outside of marriage is not healthy. The idea that it is good and healthy is a lie. That being said, what does that matter? Good question — not a hell

Sex Bomb?

By Paul Kohl

of a lot. Those of us who have committed this sin (count me in) are covered by grace so it doesn't count against us.

(Continued on page 6)

The law was added so the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. Romans 5:20 NIV

So why the fuss? We as Christians are in Christ and are in a state of Grace. That is way cool. In this state, God works out all things for the good of those who love him. So what turned out to do us good can be mistaken for right. Let us not confuse Grace with Right. Just because God *made* it good does not mean the act was good in itself. God is not stymied by evil, he simply uses it. Jesus is Lord.

So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation; the old has gone the new has come! 2 Corinthians 5:16-17 NIV

If we embrace the lie that we did nothing wrong we begin the thought process of keeping the law. Now isn't that odd, by blowing off the law we somehow convince ourselves that we kept it. Once we have kept the law we no longer receive the gift of Grace but the deserved payment for our Obedience. To pretend that it is OK blinds us to our need of a savior. How can we accept the gift of Grace when we do not think we need it?

For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not? 1 Corinthians 4:7 NIV

If we, in turn, embrace the law then we are condemned. That does not seem to be an improvement. Let us remember that condemnation is not from Christ. So if we feel condemned, we can be sure evil (Satan, your competing-with-God self, however it manifests) is at the bottom of it. Realization

that Grace increased all the more is what Christ wants. So do not sweat it, he sweated it for you. Let us not exchange the lie of healthy sex outside of marriage for shame.

The purpose of this article is not make you feel bad about committing this sin nor is it to make you feel better than others because you didn't. It is to remind us that we, at all times, need a savior. Let us not credit our salvation to anything other than Christ.

Side Note: the idea that we can love in this way, outside of the commitment of marriage, is not love but self-love. In essence we are saying "I am deciding my needs and urges need to be met." Usually this happens between two people who are happy to oblige each other because both sets of needs are met. It seems loving on the surface but the reality is that it is merely self-loving. Satan uses this to plant a bomb that goes off later and Jesus uses this bomb to bring eternal life, how cool.

I must admit that upon first reading David Bestwick-Satterlee's article *Sexuality and Singleness* (Vol. 2, Issue 2 April 2000), I found nothing objectionable in either his ideology or his reasoning. In fact, it made a lot of sense to me. I didn't find it particularly affecting, but I found that it followed the general course of what I've been taught and would, in fact, reason myself regarding the sometimes-nebulous realm of Christian sexuality. I describe it as such despite the fact that it's rarely construed as nebulous at all. On the contrary, it seems that the present-day church has successfully divided the realm into cut-and-dry quadrants which

Integrated!

By Devin Greenwood

define sexuality in a very particular way, especially for the young. I

had never questioned the value of these divisions or their affect on me as a person; and naturally, would have ascribed any, what I would have considered "aberrant," sexual activity on my part to my fallen nature or to some lack of resolve or commitment to Christ. I think a lot of Christians share this kind of thinking about their sexuality.

It was not until much later on, upon reading Pam Rowen's response to that article *I Wish Someone Had Told Me...* (Vol. 2, Issue 3 July 2000), that I got a glimpse of what had really been going on inside of me my whole life. What I saw at once surprised me and seemed wholly obvious. It went totally contrary to the grain of the floorboards of my being, and at the same time felt utterly right and almost fundamental. God was initiating a process of unraveling and revealing that was more intimate, more basic to who I am, and more radical than anything I have ever experienced in my life with Him. As is often the case, I think, this revolution of the senses didn't come by way of truths that I didn't already hold. It was rooted in ideas I had pretty much embraced for most of my life. I have for a long time held, for instance, that in the beginning, the created order was inherently good; that seeming contradictions in nature or in psyche are rectifiable in the wide-spanning truth of the Spirit. I've always held that mathematics and religion and philosophy and art and sexuality and quantum physics are all one, all spooled together in the mind of our wild, eloquent Creator. I've always loved the image of the Church as Bride and of Christ as Groom. I'd often speak of how sex is the most vivid picture of the kind of connection God desires with us individually. To sum it all up, somebody had told me. I knew that sex is good and that God loves our sexuality. And it was from that starting point that I began to read of how Pam grew up embarrassed by, even

(Continued on page 7)

detesting her sexuality. Of how she perceived it as a “polar opposite” to her spirituality and felt disconnected from it. It was from that starting point that I began to realize that between what I knew about sex and my experience as a sexual being, lay a deep, cavernous divide, one which I had unmistakably grown to accept and even at times, unimaginably come to embrace. A great, Godless gulf between my ideas about wholeness and redemption and the reality of guilt, frustration, loneliness and disconnection from God.

So the question was: how does this happen? How is it that I can know one thing as sure as I know the Lord’s Prayer and yet in my experience enact the exact opposite? How is it that I can know that sex is good, but yet find myself experiencing vague repulsion at the sight of a display of sexuality as mild and as natural as my dog getting an erection? How is it that I can know that sexuality is God-placed and God-invented but shudder at the thought of using the word “penis” or “vagina” in prayer? The truth is, that despite all I knew, I actually detested my own sexuality. In a place, deep and central lay the belief that outside of the literal act of sex within the context of marriage, sexuality was somehow inherently displeasing to God and degrading to us, His creatures. The whole realm of sexuality outside the act of marital sex was a hazy, gray-zone, like the exhaust fumes from an idling vehicle. Until it was time to get in and drive, you had to just sit there and choke...or wear a gas mask. I vacillated between both. At times I would successfully block out the fumes, which provided temporary but welcome relief from the guilt. At others times, which was most of the time, I would simply sit and choke, engaging in one dehumanizing sexual experience after another. Whether it was sex or pornography or voyeurism or masturbation, I was being torn, one limb from another, by the powerful passionate forces of my genuine love for God and my seething, repressed sexuality.

When I read Pam’s advice: that if my sexuality seemed urgent and desperate that I needed to allow God to “know” me in the most intimate way in that most intimate place, with all of the sexual implications therein, I felt an urgent compulsion. It was the Spirit of God in its most gentle, generous and astonishing form: His Grace, beckoning with hands extended, offering a treasure of breathtaking beauty and immeasurable worth. All of a sudden, as if old, paint-peeling, weather-worn shutters had been pried loose and dusty, cob-webbed curtains flung wide, I could see plain as day that what I had tried to control, suppress, ignore and shut off for so long, but time and time again been dominated by, was in fact one of the most beautiful, mysterious and passionate cross-sections of my spiritual being, one that God most desperately wanted to inhabit, wholly and thoroughly. I

How is it that I can know that sexuality is God-placed and God-invented but shudder at the thought of using the word “penis” or “vagina” in prayer? The truth is, that despite all I knew, I actually detested my own sexuality. In a place, deep and central lay the belief that outside of the literal act of sex within the context of marriage, sexuality was somehow inherently displeasing to God and degrading to us, His creatures.

realized that instead of being an unfortunate and inconvenient by-product of the late-marrying age in which we live, my day to day sexual desires are a gift from the God of Hosts and meant to be a touchstone for worship and intimate communion with Him!

This revelation was astonishing for me, as was the subsequent cleansing process the Lord began in my soul. “Try me Lord and know my thoughts; search me

Lord and know my penis.” These were the words I repeated over and over to God in my search to be “known”. They initially caused a tremendous amount of turmoil in my being. Every muscle, every thought and eventually every memory resisted the notion of using that word in prayer. After a couple of minutes, every time the word “penis” came around, perverted images and memories began to flood through my mind. I began to realize that in my subconscious, this was what I associated my penis with. That all the names for our private parts we are taught as children instill a subtle sense of shame and that the more sordid language that we sometimes adopt later on in life is a simple maturation of that shame.

Later on as I was drifting off into sleep, the Lord brought a memory to my mind which impressed me as being the root of my sexual brokenness. I discovered masturbation and orgasm at an unusually young age for a boy. Somewhere around age three, I can remember describing to my mother the feeling I got after rubbing my penis against my leg. Her response, though not at all surprising, turned out to be, I believe, very damaging. She said, “No, no you mustn’t do that. Jesus doesn’t like it when you do that.” Now, I want to clarify that in my estimation, I could not have had better parents. Most of what God has invested in me, he has done through them. Their modeled faith and genuine love for God, replicated themselves in my own heart. Nevertheless, from that moment on, a deep subconscious belief that sexual pleasure was bad and that my penis was bad began defining my sexual experience before I had even learned to associate it with the opposite sex. Eventually my Mother’s response also taught me that I was bad because I couldn’t stop doing it. Unfortunately, that

(Continued on page 8)

message didn't stop there. I continued to get it throughout my life through an endless string of youth group meetings, health classes in Christian school, sermons, books, videos...

All of this spread itself before my mind and heart as I lay there in bed, sexually innocent again for the first time since I was three. I imagined what my life would have been like if my Mom had said, "That's wonderful, be sure and praise Jesus in that moment because it's His gift to you and *your time with Him*." I wondered what my sexuality would have looked like if I had known that I had more than these two choices when I felt turned on: to try and repress it and thereby "please God", or to suck the experience dry and completely exclude God from it... if I had always known to let it flow through me and unto Him, and to worship Him in it... if my first sexual experiences had been with Him and my sexual desire, for Him first.

As I moved through the following days and weeks, I began to encounter the fruit of what had taken place in my heart. My experience as a man has been that in this society, sexual stimulation is a pretty dependable state of being. You can pretty much depend on being that way from time to time whether you're looking for it or not. There was a difference now, however. I found that the urgency, which had so often defined that experience in the past, had been replaced by a beautiful sense of liberation. The occasional desperation had given way to a peaceful wonderment. I felt as if something deep and substantial had suddenly come to life, as if an enormous empty chasm had been filled with the essence of which the rest of me consisted. Mingled therein was also the sense that something had died...a quiet, subtle sense of loss. I thought of how ironic it was that I had come to esteem and even coddle that chasm and it's cold, dark spaces so as to even consider its passing, even if only in the farthest-flung regions of my subconscious. I realized that these were the last,

crumbling moorings of a vessel newly set to sea, once empty and shiftless, now filled with treasure, its course firmly set.

So what exactly is its course? Where is this sailing ship of sexuality going? My answer now, is that my sexuality is God's. It belongs to Him until the day that I give it away to my wife...and then it's still His. You see, it's not just a way of relating to God and it's not just a way of relating to a marriage partner, it's both and more. It is a basic component of my personhood and God wants to consume me as a whole person. I will experience sexual stimulation in life outside of marriage, that is a fact. And that's ok. What we are being asked to do is something as simple and as common as a careless gesture between friends and yet as foreign as the strangest alien planet: to allow God such access to our sexuality, to cultivate such an openness toward Him in that realm of our beings, that sexual stimulation becomes a prayer, whispers from the Holy of Holies, both intense and mild, that God can wholly inhabit us to the exclusion of everything else. We are God's temple and when He is fully resident, then the course is set. But on the contrary, without his full and complete indwelling, there is nothing but varying degrees of emptiness and death, even for the married. To be sexually pure is to be sexually integrated, to have let Christ bring your sexuality into the rest of you, completely subject to and inhabited by His Spirit.

Many who will read this article will find this concept disturbing, it will make many uncomfortable. Indeed, in some ways it still makes me uncomfortable. However, it defies logic that an element of our spiritual make-up as basic as our sexuality be so shameful and even odious as to become something clandestine and unspeakable in the body of Christ. It is a testament to the extent to

which we have let the Enemy's perverting, distorting work in the world pervade our own thinking about our bodies and ourselves. Remember what James says, "Don't be deceived my dear brothers (and sisters). Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows."

Let's talk about it. Let's dialogue. Don't be afraid to say "vagina" (or read it). Say it without shame. Say it to redeem it.

"Our silence will not protect us. Our best protection is to speak the truths of our lives insofar as we can, with one another's presence and help, and cultivate carefully together those truths we cannot yet speak, truths that may be still very unformed and young. We are shaping history with our words. Either we speak as best we can or our power in relation will slip away like a thief in the night."

(from Sexuality and the Sacred)

Final Goal Check 99-00

This is a regular feature of this letter. It's hard to dialogue without the facts! We adopted these goals in September of 1999. Every quarter we pray that you are interested enough to consider how we are doing (A copy of our new 2000-2001 Strategy is available).

Network Goals

Plant our next congregation in a new neighborhood between Nov. 1999 and Feb. 2000.

We were going by February. Started public worship in March and restarted in October. We did substantial rehab on a building, moved Circle Venture work into it, too.

Generate compassionate service through Circle Venture, in order to show God's loves in practical ways.

Lots of action in computer training and refurbishing. A room for a Computer Center in the Northwest was completed. "Jubilee Days" on creating Jesus-centered business was held, homelessness and advocacy for children were held, several one-shot projects were organized. Incorporation and 501c3 status were accomplished.

Develop the teaching ministry of gifted teachers, inventing approaches that primarily use our cell system.

This did not prove practical for us, yet.

Conduct an overnight spiritual retreat for everyone interested.

70+ people had a wonderful time.

Commission a Damascus Road anti-racism team.

A team was trained and began to influence our practices.

Improve office administration.

We hired Ed Jeffcoat to begin as Partner for Development on October 16.

Receive over \$120,000 to our Common Fund from local sources.

As of October 1 reports said we had received \$122,854 from 92 givers of record, which includes \$3000 from donors outside the network and \$6148 in Building Fund money that may be returned.

Provide Christian counseling at a reasonable cost through Circle Counseling, developing it within its limitations.

Many people were helped. We made a connection with a psychiatrist and added another therapist.

Organize a better system to distribute our Compassion Fund and connect people with other resources.

No improvement in organization. That was assigned to Circle Venture. We did give hundreds of dollars to help people in need.

Center City Goals

Multiply all cells during the year.

The Network began the year with 11 cells and ended the year with 18 going or forming.

Find a new worship space for 200+ people that gives opportunity for concerts and other art events.

We spent a lot of energy looking, zeroed in on 19th and Montrose (which is still a possibility).

Organize a means to create more opportunities for group prayer.

The 7am Tuesday prayer meeting began and met weekly.

Incorporate more of the arts and other diverse elements into our worship times.

Many examples abound. A cell developed that focused on providing for worship.

Organize worship leaders for better administration and planning.

We had our first public meeting teams training time.

Equip and empower more women to lead.

Women took the lead in many enterprises.

Improve the quality of our outreach media.

Our web page is presently in redesign as are several other vehicles. We were not notably successful here.

Organize at least a quarterly event designed for introducing ourselves to people in Center City.

We held several events. Again, we were not notably successful here.

Commission people willing to oversee our attention to environmental issues.

One cell has some devotion this.

Solidify the leaders and vision for our ministry to children.

A Children's Team developed and improved our vision and ministry.

Organize a means to better reach teens.

We did not succeed in this.

Support the formation of healthy intentional community households.

Our first Dialogue on Community was held. An issue of the Dialogue was devoted.

Northwest Goals

Maintain an ongoing intercessory prayer team specifically for the church plant.

A prayer meeting was sustained.

Recruit and train the Germantown formation team.

This was accomplished.

Develop core group for the new congregation.

This was accomplished.

Recruit new people through networking and friendship evangelism, especially from Germantown area.

Much work was done on this.

Rent an affordable place for worship and office space.

This was accomplished, 5619 Germantown Ave..

Purchase necessary office and church related supplies and equipment.

This was accomplished.

Plan and hold first public worship.

This was accomplished, twice!

Educate and facilitate congregation's involvement with Circle Venture.

Circle Venture's office and main project are in the Northwest.

Multiply to seven to ten cell groups.

Four cells grew in the Northwest.

Gather 100 plus regular attenders.

We never got over 20 regulars for the public meeting, which resulted in starting over.

Develop a multi-ethnic worship team.

This was not fully accomplished.

About the Center City Building

We asked people to give \$10-20,000 above and beyond regular monthly giving to make a downpayment on property for our Center City congregation. We raised \$11,718.00 in gifts and pledges. This got us well on our way to buying a building at 19th and Montrose. After we had a neighborhood meeting to assess the feelings and opinions of the neighborhood, we decided we had to do more research, which we have been slowly doing, as well as researching better options. None of the money has been spent, nor will it be if we do not purchase a building.