
Dialogue

Volume 5 Issue 4 *Strength for the church's journey into wholeness in Christ* October 2003

The subject: *Multiplication*

In Ephesians 5, Paul says the relationship of a husband and wife is like that of Christ and the church. Knowing Paul as I do, I'd say he means to imply that if you want to see how the universe works, think about sex.

Well, maybe he's not saying that *exactly*, but I wouldn't put it past him. God certainly seems to enjoy the impressive and varied fruit that comes from loving unions: between husband and wife, between Jesus and his bride. The whole creation is groaning with childbirth all the time. It is safe to say that most of us feel called to sex much of the time. Jesus calls us to bear fruit. Sounds like a lot of connection and "be fruitful and multiply"ing is going on.

Here and there in history, the church has gone a little "Victorian" in our understanding of sex. In the late 1800's some people's morality dictated that they cover the legs of their *tables*, lest they seem too erotic. That doesn't seem like God to me. So we tend to be believers who kind of run around *sans tablecloth*, enjoying the fecundity of the Spirit. In case you could not follow that metaphor, read on.

Robert will explain our biology-like "chaos" of a structure. Joshua will say more about the other reason he's feeling so pregnant. Several people who have recently experienced the multiplication of their cells will talk about that experience. And Jane will try to give you a run-down on how the farmers who oversee this herd try to keep up with all the birthing going on.

It is hard to talk about the church unless one uses pictures from nature — pictures of coming together and naturally spawning new life. It is what God does.

— Ed.

Chaos

I want to begin a discussion about the "chaos of a multiplying organism," and how this might be different from traditional ways of "doing church." Somehow invoking the word "chaos" to describe what God is doing in the Circle of Hope community seems wholly appropriate, for it is, indeed, chaotic, though perhaps no more chaotic than the way God seems to "run the world" generally. Who could have imagined, for example, that...

...a king, who is also the Son of God, would be born in a manger?

...that this king would later proclaim



that he came "not to be served, but to serve?"

...that he would say about himself that he had "no place to lay his head," that he was, essentially, homeless?

...that he would say of his followers that the last among them would be first, and the first, last?

Who could have imagined that this king, whom many hoped would bring political liberation to his oppressed people, would be betrayed unto death by one of his own disillusioned followers, and that the king would willingly submit to death, "even death on a cross," because this death, and the resurrection which followed it, was the very mark of the king's kingdom?

Who would have thought that life could come from death in this way, that a community could come from brokenness, and that the king would then build his kingdom through this very commu-

nity, imperfect though it may be?

And so we who call ourselves by his name, we Christians -- if we are truly to be so, that is, if we are truly "Christians" and hence, Christ's, if we are subjects of his kingdom and wish to follow where he would lead -- we must be willing to follow him in (and finally through) death. For he tells us that it is only by doing so, only by losing our life, that we can truly find it.

But what does this mean, and what does it all have to do with the "chaos of a multiplying organism?" To put it simply, as Rod has so often reminded us, "we are the Church," the Body of Christ. As such, it is our high and special calling to embody the kingdom of God. Yet we must always remember that the kingdom which we are to, literally, "flesh out," is a dichotomous one marked by the seeming chaos described above. Christ is *both* human and divine. As followers of Christ, as Christians, we are *both* "saint" and "sinner." We are *both* "in the world (which does not refer to the created order itself but rather to that power, that system, which has been set up in opposition to the power of God)," and yet somehow (and now perhaps more obviously) not "of it." The kingdom of God is *both* present now, and is yet to come, for Jesus says it is "upon" us; yet we know that it is not complete yet—the world is still haunted by brokenness, fragmented by sin and separation, so that the very earth itself "groans" in anticipation of its own redemption. God "gave his only begotten Son" out of his love for the whole "world (which in this case does refer to the created order)" because all the world has been marked by humanity's sin.

Because of all of this, the manner in which we go about structuring our "life together" matters, in profound and important ways. We don't just "do church" like everybody else. We don't "go to church" on Sunday; nor do we belong to that "church" that is located at any of our three addresses. All due

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respect and appreciation to Rod notwithstanding, we are not dominated by a professional clergyman, and we do not “advertise” our wares in the “religious marketplace;” nor are we dominated by an exceedingly costly building, the expense of which we justify by offering an ever increasing number of “programs” meant to appeal to a diverse demographic, being sure to market our “product” to every niche (and, consequently, reducing the aforementioned “professional clergyman” to nothing more than a “program jockey”). None of these things apply to “our church” because, again, we are the Church, the Body of Christ, the “new humanity” which God is calling into being, the embodiment (or sign) of the kingdom of God. Perhaps J.B. Libanio puts it best in speaking about cell groups, as he is quoted by William Beckham in his book, *The Second Reformation*:

They are not a movement, an association or a religious congregation...They are not a method (or the only method) of building up the church: they are the church itself. They are not a miraculous recipe for all the ills of society and the church. They are the church renewing itself...They are not a utopia; they are a sign of the kingdom, though they are not the kingdom...They are not messianic, but they can be prophetic and produce prophets like the church should. They are not a natural...community...identified with a race, language, people, family...They are the church...They are not a protest group, although their life is a protest against mediocrity, sloth and inauthenticity of many...They are not special groups for special people. They are the church committed to the ordinary man, to the poor, to those who suffer injustice...They are not closed: they are open to dialogue with all. They are not a reform of anything in pastoral work: they are a decisive pastoral option, made in order to construct a new image of the church.

Of course, this is a very “upside-down” way of thinking about “church,” or rather,

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as one Christian writer has been so good to remind us, this is a very “right side up” way of being the Church, for sin has set everything “upside-down” and to join with God in his redemption of the world is to join with him in setting everything aright. To be the Church in this way is not to engage in some compartmentalized religious activity, a fragment among the many others that are the pieces of our lives. Rather, to be the Church in this way is to engage in a way of life (together), a way balanced by the “two wings” of our cells and PM’s, a way in which all members of the community are called upon to exercise their gifts, most especially in their cell- it is a way of life that has the power to capture the imagination.

It has certainly captured mine. When Kirsten and I came to Philly and the Circle of Hope community as very young newlyweds in August of 1996

we found our “Circle of Hope experience” to be simply transformative. Our cell (s) nurtured and loved us, including walking us through a very difficult time when I was involved in an accident in which I was hit by two guys in a stolen car. I had just left my cell leader’s house on the way to the Sunday evening PM. He came along not too long later, saw me, and eventually

stayed with me until the tow truck came, which he paid for, and in the meantime he confronted someone who tried to steal my license plate off my just-“totaled” car, and then drove me to pick up Kirsten from work. Someone else in our cell convinced her dad to give us an old car that he wasn’t using and not only paid for the little bit of work that it needed, but also paid off the several thousand dollar difference between the insurance settlement and what we still owed on the car that we no longer had, and let us pay her back as we were able. This is certainly a profound, though not, I believe, unique, “snapshot” into the kind of life that we

share together. Though we had to leave Philly and the Circle of Hope community after only two years in order to be with Kirsten’s dying father in Minnesota, our hearts remained, and I even worked to build cell groups in our Minnesota church community while I went to seminary there during our five year absence. Consequently, it was indeed with great joy that we returned to Philly and Circle in late May of this year, and it continues to be a privilege to be, with all of you, “a circle of hope in Christ Jesus.”

Robert Buck

At a Center City public meeting this



Just one Circle Thrift pic. Thanks Joel.

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.

Why I Want to Multiply the Congregation

month we sang to God, each other, and to the world "Jesus is alive and He's alive in me! Jesus is alive and He's alive in us!" The gravity of that statement we made still resonates in my chest like Jiffy Pop in its little tinfoil cage -- I feel like I'm about to burst! I am excited to be part of this group, this people, you. This people who are marching with Jesus to war, following Him to all new levels and places that I never thought we could go as a church; places I was too afraid to go in my own life.

We need to share in Jesus' death and rise to new life with Him, believing. I believe. I believe that God is still redeeming the world through relationships with people. These people form the church and try to collectively do Christ's work. Those three convictions have kept us busy as bees as we've been working towards the goal that we set last year to "hive off the Center City congregation," to have a big-time multiplication. I want to share some of my perspective on that goal. I will also try to recap some of our process and our progress.

You might be asking yourself "what is hiving?" It's like what bees do. Part of the Center City congregation is going to leave our overcrowded "hive" and go begin a daughter congregation. We are sending out a group of 50-70 of us to begin a new public meeting in the Kensington area this January for four major reasons: the vision, the need, the resources, and the call.

Our vision is to be a reconciling network of congregations as diverse as the kingdom of God by multiplying cells that are authentic expressions of life in Jesus. What we don't want is to be one "mega church" with one huge congregation. We are working to be a network of many smaller congregations (around 200 people in each) composed of cells that meet throughout the city (and beyond).

The need: our Center City congregation has outgrown its space. As much as we all like sitting on each other's laps every Sunday we are becoming less and less accessible for new people to join. We, as a church, are committed to main-

taining a presence in Center City. We have been actively searching and praying for a new, larger site that could accommodate our burgeoning group but have yet to find one under the million dollar range to purchase. We could think of many things we'd rather spend \$1 million on (if we even had that much!) besides a building in which our church could have its functions. Hiving the congregation is a way to allow the church to grow, as it is doing.

The resources are basically the people and the space. About 30 of our regular attenders live in the Kensington area. That right there makes it a desirable area for us to have a public meeting. These aren't just people who would capitalize on cheap rent or something, but people who own their homes, work in the neighborhood, grew up in the neighborhood, work with the poor, by vocation develop the area, live in community, multiply cell groups, are raising their children, and are committed to seeing Jesus reign there.

We have been working for a couple years with the MCC (Mennonite Central Committee) Thrift Store Network to create a thrift store here in Philly. It's going to be the place where the area MCC stores send their excess items to be sold, and a way to deepen our connection to this worldwide advocacy, relief, and development organization. We recently purchased a building in the Kensington area (God blessed us with a spectacular deal!). Our enthusiastic rehab workers are making great progress. We are setting aside space on the second floor of this building for, among other things, a new Public Meeting.

The call probably should be explained in both how we are called as a group to this hiving business and how I am called to lead it. I am trying to run a thread through this entire piece about how we are being called so that I can elaborate a little more on my personal calling, more along the lines of conviction. My story has been that of a kid from Nowhere, NY coming to the big city; messing up a bit, but taking many small steps over the years and growing into a man who wants to go all out for Jesus. I've lived around this "East Philadelphia" area for a couple years and have seen and felt things that convince me that this is enemy territory, and Jesus wants to take over.

On one side of the tracks there are

the churched people, mostly people of color, who are trying to deal in the heroine hotbed of the country. Addiction and fear keep the area tightly under control by the enemy. On the white, unchurched side of the tracks, we find a similar grip but with pride and hate as their flags. We are putting ourselves at the crossroad where these neighborhoods come together (more like crash together). They need to be reconciled to Jesus. I am reminded of what Paul said to the church in Ephesus in Ephesians 6 "*...we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age...*" We are fighting a war, and it is a spiritual one.

Circle of Hope is for the next generation, and that one is a godless generation. Taking Jesus' call in Matthew 28 to "*...make disciples of all the nations...*" we will be a reconciling presence in this area for Christ, bringing new people into relationship with Him and His church. We will also be a place for spiritual development for those who already believe. Making disciples is our business but that includes helping people get their basic physical needs met as well. That will include referring them to partnering agencies to which we're connected. We build the church through relationships, not programs. We help develop these together through our cell groups and public meetings. Our Thrift Store that shares our building is our primary means of getting the word out with various complimentary ways of connecting the community such as art, music, community education classes, movie nights, and other ways of making friends.

In the smallest nutshell, we have the people and a space in an area where we're already at work to further the Kingdom by growing cells and a new public meeting towards the goals that God has given us. We are getting the formation team together even as I write this article, as well as finding those 50-70 founders to commit for at least a year. There is plenty of room for you on this mission if you should accept. I would love to speak with you personally about this experiment. If you feel called to join us, please come forward so we can work it out together.

Joshua Grace

The gospel story is one of life fol-

How Multiplying Our Cell Felt

lowing death. Sometimes I forget this when I face death. The time my first cell multiplied felt a little bit like death to me. I wanted to avoid it like I would want to avoid death -- because I would miss the life of my cell. I would miss these eight or so amazing specific people and the way they talked and the way they laughed and the way they prayed and the way God met us in that loft near 5th and Girard. After our multiplication I grieved the loss of it and I caught myself hardening up to my next unknown cell before it had even begun. I thought of a thousand reasons why it wouldn't be as good, why it wouldn't be the same. At Rachel and Ryan Bowers' wedding ceremony Gwen spoke about the part in Ephesians where Paul writes: I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. And Gwen said that if we allow God to take our tiny love and make it wide and long and high and deep than we will have to let it go in a way, to let it change..to let it widen and deepen. And that means that one day Rachel and Ryan will look at each other and understand love that they would have never imagined on their wedding day... and it will not be the same...and that is okay. My next cell was not the same as my first. But by the end of our first meeting together I was astounded at the beauty of these new people, the way they talked and laughed and prayed. and God met us. Love was deeper. Life followed death.

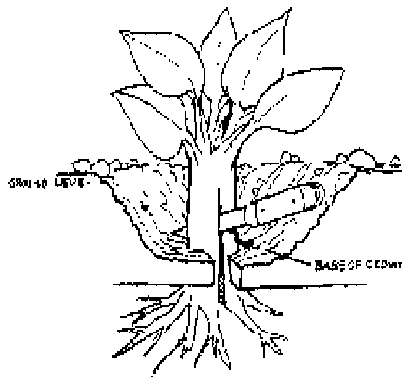
Sarah Wilson

Room to Grow.....So our cell multiplied recently. We had been meeting in West Philly faithfully for a year. This summer, our group was bursting at the seams with up to twelve people some nights. We decided it was time to multiply, and the planning process became more deliberate. When we began to discuss the multiplication as a group, some fears surfaced. "I really like THIS group." "Where will we meet?" "Who will come?" I explained that multiplication, while uncomfortable, is

ultimately a sign of growth – and makes room for more growth.

This past year I have taken up gardening as a hobby, since I have a small yard in Overbrook. We have a huge Hosta plant that has been there quite some time. I learned that Hosta multiplies by division. A Hosta plant can be divided up into smaller Hosta plants, which will grow to the size of the parent plant. So I took a sharp spade and a knife and I cut this Hosta plant into wedges, kind of like pizza. I replanted these sections of Hosta in another spot of my garden. These new little Hosta plants needed a bit of TLC – extra water, good compost, some sun. Once they were established, all four of my plants were thankful for the room to grow.

I think our cell groups work the same way. After some time growing together, cell groups can get crowded.



There's less room for new people to join in because the existing group has grown together so closely. When our cell groups multiply, we allow people the opportunity to start fresh and grow in a new way. When our roots are in Christ, multiplication gives us all some room to grow.

Now our multiplication process has not been simple or easy, don't get me wrong. It's been tough figuring out the plan for this next stage, growing new leadership, and connecting with people who are looking for a cell. I trust that God is in this process, working in us, through us, and sometimes despite us. Ultimately, multiplication exercises our faith. It calls us to depend on Christ to bring new growth; we simply create the space by submitting to the multiplication process.

Alison Handy

This is the first time I have taken on the responsibility of leading a cell and I am very excited. My experience with my cells' multiplication process, however, was and is challenging and frustrating. What I thought would be a simple process seemed to be filled with a number of other expectations I was not previously aware of. It seemed more bureaucratic, more loops. I had problems understanding the communication about the process or completely missing it. Alternatively, what in fact was decision-making that depended on my action was not clear to me. My competency for leadership was even challenged. Finally, things were worked out and my understanding is now clearer.

Most of the participants from my former cell stayed in tact with their beginnings and I accepted the challenge of creating a cell from scratch. At the time of this reading, our third or fourth cell meeting will have taken place and its slow going with continued challenges, such as the location of my cell and how it may or may not facilitate others. No host/ess and perhaps no apprentice at the present time leaves me to wonder what I was thinking when I said YES.

In any case, I believe I was responding to a call God gave me that is completely in line with what Circle of Hope is doing and this excites me: growing the body of believers into maturity/disciples and introducing those who don't know Christ into a safe place and space. Do I have any idea about what I am doing? Don't know. I'd do like to think so. Ultimately, this is where I am completely dependent on God.

Nathan Bowden

Multiplication, not division. Though I miss Aubrey and Natalie, Joel and Crystal, Amy and even Jacob — I feel separated from them but not divided. Our small team, this cell of 12 or so people, has not gone in two directions but one. We are committed to making room for more people to know Jesus in our homes. We knew that as we got too comfortable with one another, it wouldn't be comfortable for someone new to join us. We knew that as Aubrey's living room filled to overflowing with people sitting on all available surfaces (the stacks of newspapers in the corner, the arms of chairs) that there was not an "open chair" for anyone new to enjoy.

We are two cells now with a similar heritage...my new cell, the Megan/Rachel cell...is descended from Aubrey, which descended from Shelley, which descended from Pat, which descended from Rod four years ago. And that legacy continues to call us into relationship with our former cell members, even as we seek to love the next.

Megan Scott

Multiplying the Leadership Team

It was a chilly Sunday in November 1998 when I first showed up at Circle of Hope. Like many of us, I entered the room not sure what I'd find, and praying to make some kind of connection. It worked. I was quickly gathered into a brand new cell, as an apprentice to Annette Jeffrey, a new cell leader. As I got my bearings and started attending cell leader meetings every month, I had the privilege of learning how the Leadership Team worked from an up close and personal view.

The Circle of Hope Leadership Team presently consists of the coordinators and cell leaders. A coordinator is a cell leader who oversees 3-5 cell leaders and represents them to the other coordinators. This group would be called an "executive board" or "church board" in other organizations, I suppose. The pastor is always a cell leader and usually a coordinator. Further coordinators are selected by the other coordinators in consultation with the cell leaders. As the number of cells grows, so does the number of coordinators. We have been known to ask the cell leaders who they think should be the next coordinator from among them. When new cell leaders join the team, they are assigned to one of the coordinators. Does this diagram from our Cell Multiplication Plan help?

Back in 1998, there were two coordinators and eight cell leaders. That number is not huge, so apprentice cell leaders normally attended Leadership Team meetings/cell leader trainings. Apprentice cell leaders are not members of the Leadership Team, but they are "in training" for it. For me, those first months as an apprentice taught me a lot about how Circle

of Hope operates. First of all, cell leaders talk a lot. But that's not all. They also listen! Soon I realized—we are not just talking, we are making decisions and we are growing and learning. What a genius idea!

As the number of cells multiplied according to our plans and answering our prayers, the number of people at cell leader meetings concurrently grew. Somewhere along the line, apprentices were released from the responsibility of attending the monthly meeting. Although they are always welcome (most meetings are open to everyone among Circle of Hope), the leadership team decided that apprentices would be trained primarily by their cell leaders, and not at the monthly meeting.

Since each coordinator oversees 3-5 cells, and cells are designed to multiply, it makes sense that the number of coordinators grows steadily. Currently, five coordinators oversee 27 cells connected to the Center City and Northwest public meetings, and the cells keep multiply

During regular interactions, cell members talk to their cell leaders about concerns, ideas, and feedback. The cell leader shares this input with a coordinator who takes it to the rest of the team. Ultimately, we still make decisions as a body, as long as members of the body continue to engage in dialogue. And we seem to be pretty good at that, so far. For instance, You are still reading this, right?

ing. Joshua Grace, a coordinator and Circle of Hope's new apprentice pastor, is gathering a body of people to start a new public meeting in Kensington. As that congregation grows, even more cell leaders will join the team. It's exciting! Monthly Leadership Team meetings are crowded with dedicated people who work hard growing the church with God. However, facilitating dialogue among thirty leaders is starting to get awkward.

We keep cells to circles of about ten people. When they get bigger than that, they multiply. We can't multiply the leadership team, though, so we are thinking of a better way to lead the church. The coordinators' role has been evolving as this happens. Lately, the coordinators have been working hard to transfer the

dialogue that used to happen at cell leader trainings into each coordinator's "coordinating group" meeting.

So far, it's working well. If our communication channels are truly open, communication doesn't need to happen among all of us in one room. (Although that will still happen as needed.) We hope that deeper discussions will occur in monthly coordinating group meetings of five cell leaders and that each coordinator will bring the points of that discussion to the rest of the team of Coordinators where most of the month-to-month decisions will be made. We'll leave most of the day-to-day to our team of pastors, as we do now.

As the cell leader coordinators take on more of the guidance of the church and become our Leadership Team, how does this shift affect the input that a cell member has to Circle of Hope decision-making? It doesn't. In theory, it's simple. During regular interactions, cell members talk to their cell leaders about concerns, ideas, and feedback. The cell leader shares this input with a coordinator who takes it to the rest of the team. Ultimately, we still make decisions as a body, as long as members of the body continue to engage in dialogue. And we seem to be pretty good at that, so far. For instance, you are still reading this, right?

The Circle of Hope Leadership Team will continue to grow and change as the church itself grows. A new pastoral team is forming, with Joshua in East Philly and Rod in Center City, and hopefully we will have another pastor for the Northwest join them next year. As we grow, we will continue to follow our mission to "build the church for the next generation by the power of the Holy Spirit." And we will continue to live by our proverbs, one of which is that "Leaders listen to the body and to God; their function is discernment as much as direction." Growth is good when we follow God.

Jane Clinton

Readers Respond

Two of our friends wrote very good articles for the *Shalom!* quarterly recently. We asked for permission to reprint them. They will help get us ready for our *New Humanity Month*, Dec. 28-Jan. 18.

Being Peace

by Megan Scott

I have spent the day sitting in front of the television, a sign that I am procrastinating. Not only do I need to write an article on transforming conflict, but I sit here in the midst of several conflicts, avoiding them by flicking through the channels. I know that this behavior does not bring about the peace I desire, but like a bowl of ice cream, a few hours of TV seems to take the edge off.

I choose to slip into the nothingness that virtual reality offers. I choose to stop being human, a human being. To transform conflict, I must start here, with my very being. I must be peace.

Before we can make peace, we must know what peace is. We must learn to be peace.

So, I sit down at my computer, typing what you are now reading. My mind wanders, trying to imagine how I will address those whom I oppose. I am making plans for peace in my head, like you might make bread. One cup of humility, a dash of self-respect, a tablespoon of grace and stir.

I am still not able to just sit still with myself, to just be. Nor am I willing to act on these notions. I would rather type than create the peace that I crave so desperately.

In Philippians 4, Paul asks two leaders of the church, Euodia and Syntyche to "agree with one another in the Lord." He publicly pleads with them to make peace.

Earlier in the letter, he gave them the recipe to make this loaf of peace. In Philippians 2:1-2, he says, "If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from His love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose."

They are told that if they have learned how to be peace, then they are ready to

make peace. We are attaining peace when we are united with Christ, receiving comfort from His love, fellowshiping with the Spirit, enjoying tenderness and compassion. It is only when we are in right relationship with God through Jesus that we are able to share that peace with our communities.

When we are peace, we are capable of living in harmony with others. Unless I am united with Christ, I am not capable of being one in spirit and purpose with another. I am too caught up in my own concerns. My ego is too shiny and fragile to endure the abrasiveness of becoming like-minded. And unless I make an effort towards shalom daily, I end up with my bag of chips on the couch, remote in hand.

Euodia and Syntyche were asked "to agree with each other in the Lord." They were asked to do this not within themselves, but "in the Lord."

When we are in the Lord, we are capable of being peace to one another. We realize that such divisiveness is not what God has called us to be. When I sit wallowing, caught up in my hurt, I am not receiving comfort from the love of Christ. I do not allow myself to enjoy the tenderness and compassion offered to me through unity with my Savior. Instead, I fixate on how right I am, and how wrong they are. When I am in the Lord, I do not need to be right.

Euodia was not asked to defer to Syntyche's ideas. They were asked to agree with each other. Paul pleads with them both, and asks the local community to work with them. They are both causing division in the church. Paul may believe that one of them is "right." However, he does not advocate for either side. He knows that unless they come together, the entire community will suffer.

Euodia may ultimately agree with Syntyche. But the point of agreement becomes moot in light of the harmony created in being one in Spirit and purpose.

Unfortunately, Paul's pleading does not make their harmony so. Nor does the knowledge that I must be peace, automatically transform my conflict. Euodia and Syntyche must overcome their fears and egos and sit down together. And I must do the same.

Within the danger of conflict lies opportunity. I am in conflict with people I love. They will not reject me because I disagree with them. Most likely if I express my hurt and concern, we will

grow closer. It will certainly be awkward to state that I am hurt, that I feel angry and betrayed. They will probably grow defensive, and may pull away from me for a short time to protect their pride. But ultimately our friendship will only be strengthened.

Our friendship will be all the more strengthened if I seek to be peace in the Lord. Imagine intentionally seeking to be encouraged through unity with Christ, receiving comfort from his love, fellowship with the Spirit, tenderness and compassion before confronting your friend (or foe).

I sit back in my chair and seek God. I know that Jesus is present with me and that the Spirit abides in my life. Instead of anger and frustration, I feel sad. God wants me to love as God loves. I am called to be tender and compassionate. I am not called to win this argument, or to lose it. The argument is not the point.

I am a student of "Conflict Transformation and Peacebuilding." This allows me to fully diagnose my neurosis. I know that I am a hypocrite, not practicing what I teach. I know the recipes, but cannot always make myself enter the kitchen.

Many of us know that God calls us to be peace. But we are either too terrified to try, or we attempt to make peace without agreeing with each other in the Lord.

Conflicts are transformed not because we follow *the* recipe, but because the recipe comes from God. When we are rooted in God's love, we can begin to be like-minded, to have the same love, to be one in Spirit and purpose.

Are You for Real?

by Brooke Hoffman

I'd like to tell you a story. I'm afraid it's not flashy or glamorous. In contrast, it's tough, gritty, and painful. Parts of it are terrible. Much of the story I didn't want, didn't pray for, and never imagined would happen to me.

There is one redeeming factor, though, which makes this story worth telling and reading. And that factor is Jesus, the Author of this story. In this story there is darkness, but Jesus shines his light into it. There is an empty void, but Jesus breathes life into it. There is despair, but Jesus instills hope in me . . . and in my kids.

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My kids are seventh and eighth graders at Penn Treaty Middle School in inner city Philadelphia. To them, I'm not Miss Hoffman, or even Miss Brooke. I'm just "Miss", their math and reading teacher.

Some of my kids are angry kids. Some of them are passionate. Some of them feel abandoned. A few of them are pregnant. Some of them are desperate, and all of them are hurting.

My kids don't always sit or listen. In fact, they don't come to class if they don't feel like it. They curse, suck their teeth, lie, steal, throw desks, kick glass, toss books, and curse out each other, their peers' mothers, and me.

All year they tested me to see if I was "for real."

One Thursday morning in March, one of my kids, Norberto (a fifteen year old seventh grade math student), came into my class cursing at me because I'd called his home the night before to share my concerns about his grades and behavior with his mother. I told Norberto that I'd be glad to talk with him when he was more composed. I asked him to leave and come back later. He did.

Our second conversation began calmly, but soon Norberto was accusing me of lying to his mother and making him curse out his parents in their argument. Again, Norberto began cursing at me vehemently. I stood up to signify that our conversation had come to an end.

Unsuspecting, I proceeded to walk past Norberto on my way to another part of the room. As I walked by, Norberto drew back and punched me in the face. I fell into a row of chairs, clutching my jaw. Instantly, the other kids surrounded me and held me. I don't know if Norberto intended to punch me again. If he'd tried, the circle of students around me would have prevented him.

I had never been punched before and was overcome by the pain. As my head cleared, I experienced a gamut of emotions. At first, I was just shocked. Shocked that school violence had touched me. Shocked that Norberto, who very rarely showed strong emotions, had been the student to lash out. I was overwhelmed with sadness for Norberto, sobered by this indication of what his future might be and afraid this act of aggression would lead him in a downward spiral of anger and violence. I also felt weary, frustrated with the way

my efforts to care for my kids and teach them well were repeatedly spurned.

Police from the local precinct came to Penn Treaty, talked with the school police, and arrested Norberto. Norberto was suspended and then transferred to another school. After thinking and praying, I decided to press charges at the police station. Although it was difficult, I felt peace in my spirit that it needed to be done for the sake of Norberto, my other students, other teachers, and myself.

Because Norberto was a first-time offender, he was referred to the Good Shepherd Mediation Program. The mediator contacted me, asking if I would be interested in pursuing the mediation process with Norberto. Although I had some trepidation, I was grateful for the opportunity to offer forgiveness to Norberto, especially since our last contact had been when he was led away in handcuffs.

Apprehensively, I returned to school the following Monday and found the other teachers and students supportive and relieved to see me. Many conversations ensued in which my kids shared their fears, and I shared my continued commitment to all of them. I explained my lack of anger and my desire to offer forgiveness. Although most students responded positively, some did not. As the school year continued, a few kids taunted me, even declaring in their anger that they wished Norberto would punch me again. Threats became more frequent.

After several delays, Norberto, his mother, two mediators, my mother, and I met together at a neutral location to work on the process of restoration. At first, Norberto wouldn't make eye contact. With his head on his folded arms, he added a barely audible assent, as the mediator read Norberto's description of the events leading up to the assault and the assault itself.

Then it was my turn. I shared my motivations for calling his mother that Wednesday evening in March. I wanted him to understand that by calling home and holding him responsible for his grades and attitude, I was expressing my care for him and my confidence in his potential. I shared my feelings after the assault and how it had affected me. I cried.

With his head hanging, Norberto said, "I'm sorry." I responded, "I forgive you, Norberto." My mother asked if she could hug Norberto's mother. Norberto

also rose from his seat to hug my mom. I was grateful for the chance to first see Norberto raising his arms in front of my mom, which prepared me to be ready to both give and receive a hug when he came to me.

As we continued talking, Norberto began to look at me, to nod, speak, and answer questions. His countenance had completely changed; there was life in his eyes. He and his mother shared that he is now meeting weekly with a therapist who is helping him communicate his feelings and manage his anger. He is taking medication for a related illness. He is going to summer school.

As the victim, I was given the opportunity to choose a way for Norberto to provide restitution. I invited Norberto to work with me in a neighborhood cleanup project in the fall. I wanted to give him an opportunity to contribute positively to his community, to take pride in his work, and to help restore our relationship. The mediator expressed surprise and turned to Norberto, asking him if he realized the trust I was placing in him to even suggest such a thing. Seeming to understand the gravity of her words, Norberto accepted my invitation.

As I left the mediation site, I was overwhelmed with hope. Hope for myself as I experience healing through the act of forgiving. Hope for Norberto who is getting the help he needs but may otherwise never have received. Hope that this story may be one of light, life, and hope after all.

During the year, my kids sometimes asked me, "Miss, are you for real?" (They asked me this when I first taught them negative numbers, which they thought I'd just invented to confuse them! J) What they mean is: "Do you mean what you say?" "Will you follow through?" "If you ask me to do something, will you really make me?" "Are you going to stick with us or will you give up on us?" "Do you think I have a future?" "Is the love you have for us genuine?" There were days this year when I didn't know if I could continue being "for real" to my kids, but I have never been as sure as I am now that Jesus is "for real." He alone breaks the cycle of violence, anger, hate, fear and retaliation.

This story isn't finished, and although I don't know the ending, I'm grateful to have played a part in it. I thank God for the opportunity to show my kids love for them that doesn't despair, to communicate forgiveness to Norberto, and to see Jesus at work in inner city Philadelphia. I know God is for real, and he knows what

Goal Check *July to September 2003*

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 2003. Every quarter we evaluate our progress toward meeting them.

Network

1. Through an ongoing dialogue, make a secure connection between Northwest and Center City.

This connection becomes more sure each day.

2. Enhance network-wide ways of sharing that augment the cell network

Our relationship between congregations increased dramatically when Rod began spending at least one day a week in G'town and Megan moved the Circle Venture office there.

3. Increase the activities and awareness of Circle Venture

Megan Scott and the Circle Venture leadership Team has done a good job of this through personal contact in cells and ongoing publications.

Center City

1. Prepare to multiply the Congregation in 2003-4 – call out an Apprentice Pastor from among us

Joshua Grace was confirmed as our Apprentice Pastor.

2. Prepare to multiply the Congregation in 2003-4-- Find a creative solution to our space needs.

While we continued to look for Center City space, we also bought the build-

ing at 2007 Frankford to house Circle Thrift and a public meeting.

3. Prepare to multiply the Congregation in 2003-4 -- Grow to a comfortable living size

We have experienced considerable growth in every way this past quarter.

4. Augment the ministry in our cells by offering opportunities for training and enrichment that stoke the fire of our passion for life in God's kingdom.

We have accomplished most of our objectives, mainly through the entrepreneurial expressions of individuals and teams, such as the Financial Stewardship Team, Parents Forums, the recent call to join in a weekly time of prayer.

5. Educate people about systemic racism

Discussions were had. Suzanne Bley was made an intern to help with this process until May 2004.

6. Raise \$132,000 in gifts from the congregation(s). (See budget proposal)

We have received \$98,161.44, about \$1000 under our goal. This next quarter we want to receive \$20,000 over our goal from new givers to meet the needs of our growth.

7. Grow the Effectiveness of the Public Meeting

The hosting Team and Tech Team continue to develop and serve us well.

8. Devote Ourselves to Peace in a time of war

We have continued to raise our

consciousness.

Northwest

1. Hire a part-time PM Facilitator using savings we have saved for a future pastor's salary.

Bryan Robinson has been serving us.

2. Expand and multiply each cell one time by fall.

We did not accomplish this. We have four cells functioning in varying degrees of health.

3. Organize a Coordinating group for our NW cells in the fall.

Rod is the Coordinator for these cells.

4. Grow the PM to congregation-size (40-50 attending, 80-100 regular attenders) by January 2004.

Presently, about 30 attend with about 35 regular attenders. So we are about halfway to the goal.

5. Deliberately follow the steps on inclusion from BLUYS to Covenant Member and see five people make it all the way by the end of the year.

We are on the way toward this.

6. Sign a 2-year lease by July 31.

This was accomplished.

7. Plant the seeds of further mission teams devoted to reaching unreached groups.

The NW Church Planting Support Team took its first steps recently.