

Where Would We Go?

John 6:66-69

"Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."

Summer draws to a close and September is on the horizon. We as a community enter what I've come to see as a "season of reflection and re-commitment". On Saturday, Oct. 3, we will hold our annual re-commitment silent retreat, and on Sunday, Oct. 4, those Covenant and Community Members who choose to do so will make their commitments for another year. So I find myself in a stock-taking frame of mind--of myself and of us as a community. This morning I want to touch on some things going on in our community. It would take too long to talk about everything or to go into great detail. I simply want to bring to awareness some current movements and happenings in our life and ministry, and say a bit about how they emerge.

John Caldwell, out of his commitment to the Chrysalis Mission Group, has been offering his gifts to our own community and beyond. On Sunday nights he continues to lead a Tai Chi class, and on Tuesdays he leads a time of contemplative prayer and silence for any who wish to make that a part of their inward journey discipline. John and others have brought us a needed awareness of the importance of our bodies, of the physical, to the spiritual life.

Recently Dede Buhler opened up the Lodge as part of the First Fridays city art event and has shared her own wonderful paintings. She is working with lining up art displays for these monthly events. We have a good number of artists in our community here. Who knows what God's spirit might bring forth through the gifts and callings they bring to us.

Earlier this year, Hope Snell invited women to gather in the Lodge on Fridays at noon to read Elizabeth O'Connor's CRY PAIN, CRY HOPE. This group continues to meet each week for study and sharing.

These are the ways things begin as we sense a call to offer something in the service of our community or the world around us. Someone feels a sense of call to meet a need, sharing his or her gifts. It starts as a seed and may grow into an on-going venture of following the leading of God's spirit in the service life. When we fully share our gifts in this way, we meet some need in our community of faith or in world.

The Haven Mission Group faithfully meets each week, following the vision of providing long-term supportive housing for men and women in recovery. They are looking now at an exciting model for this--The Healing Place, both in Richmond and in North Carolina. The Haven reminds us that sometimes missions need years to germinate, and the most important work is always the inward journey of the mission group itself--deepening its life together, its relationship with God, and its understanding of the ministry to which it is being called.

L'Arche Blue Ridge Mountains has been gathering its community for six years. Now there are two houses and two communities working to continue as one L'Arche family. L'Arche faces financial challenges and the challenges of being a community of mutual serving. We offer them our on-going support and prayers. What would our community be without the L'Arche Core Members and Assistants who have become so much a part of our worship and our life together! We are deeply grateful for the gifts and the life they bring to us.

Last year the St. Francis Mission Group began with those who felt called to focus on the life of justice and peace in the spirit of Francis of Assisi. They meet each Sunday morning to study, discuss, and share their lives and commitments to working with issues of peace and justice, not only in the society and world but in their relationships with one another.

The Festival Center Mission Group formed six years ago to establish a center for community in the Madison and Fifth Streets neighborhood of College Hill. The group felt called to be in a place where we could enter into community with and learn from those who are different from us racially and socio-economically. This year a series of neighborhood forums are being held at the center, and the various organizations that serve College Hill, including the City of Lynchburg and the Lynchburg Police Department, are coming together to establish partnerships to meet the needs of the community. Though we don't have the money to do it, the Festival Center Board has felt led to seek an executive director who will take ultimate responsibility for financial resources for the center, as well as its entire operation. Here is one of the "precepts" of the Church of the Covenant: You don't first of all fret about where the money will come from; you keep focused on the call and the vision, and keep moving in that direction, learning to trust. About four years ago, Kyasha, one of the young

people in our Saturday morning program, asked me a direct and serious question: "Is the Festival Center going to always be here?" The Festival Center continues to do all it can to "always be there".

Chrysalis Interfaith Retreat Center emerged three years ago to provide a place for people to come here for rest, prayer, and the renewal of their spirits, bodies, and faith. Since opening April 2007, the center has hosted about 150 guests in the Church House and Kitty's Cottage. All express gratitude for the comfort, peacefulness, and beauty of the center and these grounds. Through a special gift, we were able to expand and modify the cottage bathroom to accommodate wheelchairs. Bert and Sandy Fisher, who have been with our community for a year now, have generously offered of their creativity, expertise, vision, and labor, along with Mike Richardson, for this and other projects. Sandy also brings her vision and gifts as a landscape designer to create beautiful spaces throughout these forty acres.

We are grateful for the presence of Kai, Gilbrith, and Ella in our community. Children Worship & Wonder continues as a worship program for our children. It assumes that children already have an intimate relationship with God. We don't have to put that into them! It also assumes that children have a desire, need, and capacity for contemplation and silence, which fits well our community's view of things. This summer we have made some changes in our service to be more welcoming to children. Briefer prayers and sermons (except for today, I'm afraid!). Songs appealing to younger voices. Elements from CW&W--the lighting of the candle of God's presence and the Changing of the Light at the close, and the singing of "Be still and know that I am God" to prepare ourselves to listen for God's living word to us as we hear the written and spoken word. As with all things, when we look at our life as a community through the lens of what is good for children, we end up doing what is good for everyone.

The Mary and Martha Church Support Group continues to meet each month to care for our lovely but aging buildings, as well as the grounds. Something that has emerged in my mind increasingly is the tending, caring, and use of the whole of these 40 acres, most of which are a precious urban forest. God is calling us to a new commitment to the stewardship of this property, in partnership with Lynchburg Covenant Fellowship. We need a person or persons called to work with such a vision, and perhaps a mission group that would bear the vision and responsibility for such care and stewardship of these grounds. Such a group could open itself to new possibilities -- greater energy efficiency for our use of water and electricity, for instance. Or maybe looking at the soccer field which is seldom used anymore--what about cultivating part of it for food that could feed people? An organic garden is already there, developed by Lora Devan and Camp Kum Ba Yah. The camp has had to end that program for financial reasons. Might there be someone or a group called to pick up, even expand that mission, or to envision new uses?

Finally, I want to share with you that in recent months, the Covenant Members have been exploring an exciting and challenging opportunity--the purchase of the Cosby family home, now owned by Lynchburg Covenant Fellowship. There is a keen sense that this home that has been the fountainhead of the spiritual movement that gave birth to the Church of the Covenant, LCF, Camp Kum-Ba-Yah, and many other ministries, needs to be retained as part of our community. We are talking with LCF about the possibilities. Kaye and I have felt called to live in the home, paying rent to the church, and making the home a center for hospitality in the spirit of Kathleen Cosby and the Cosby family. This would be a big challenge for us financially as a community, but we believe it is something of great significance to retain from our past and for our future.

The activities of God's spirit are numerous, creating new possibilities all the time. However, I want to come back to something in the reading from John's gospel. If you've been reading along in the lectionary, you know that Jesus has been talking about his followers eating his body and drinking his blood. It's pretty difficult stuff. It is offensive to some to whom Jesus speaks in the story. I think Jesus is using this image to say that if we are following him in this life of faith, it is like consuming his life. It is like when we look at a beautiful painting or listen to a delightful piece of music, or enjoy a wonderfully prepared meal. We take it into ourselves. It becomes part of us and we become part of it. That's what the Church of the Covenant has been working with over the years--taking following Jesus seriously. Not a head trip but a life journey. Doing good things, yes, but only as they arise authentically in us with a sense of being called by God. The wellspring of these varying ministries is the life of each person who decides to "eat and drink Jesus," to work daily with our own lives in their inward and outward dimensions, giving attention to our relationship with God as unique persons, with unique histories, experiences, gifts, and callings.

Some decided Jesus' words were too hard, too challenging, and left. Jesus turns to the twelve remaining disciples. Do you also want to leave? Peter's response is deeply moving. They are the words of one who, for all

the challenges and hardships of this way of living, has glimpsed the truth that this is the only way to really find life. Where would we go? You are the one who has the words of life. We know that you are the one who can show us the way, the truth, and the life. In the early days, when the Church of the Covenant was but an embryo, Bev Cosby is reported to have said to his brother Gordon up in D.C., "I'm ruined for the old and don't know how to do the new." That's pretty much the spirit of the Church of the Covenant. Moving into a commitment of faith to one's inward and outward journey, seeking God's call in one's life, exercising one's gifts in faithfulness to that call; growing more deeply into a community of God's love--these things can ruin you for the old, aimless, rather superficial ways of living. Yet such a life also asks an openness, a deepening, and a willingness to grow and give that lead us into new territory, brimming with excitement and yet also some fear and trepidation. It teaches us what it means to live by faith. Making our commitments to such a life has the feel about it of Peter's words: Where else would we go? You have the words of life. We know that you are the Holy One of God. May this always be the spirit of our community.