

Ordination and orientation

I attended an ordination council at Central Baptist Church representing my home church Woodbine Heights Baptist Church. The candidate, J. Patricia Nowlan is a second career minister serving as a hospital chaplain in Hamilton. Her faith journey and theology covered all the bases. Hers is clearly a deeply held and vibrant Christian faith. In the course of the usual questions for candidates she was asked what her position on same-sex marriage was. With grace and tact she related her journey from homophobia where she had to refer Telecare calls from gay people to others to coming to know lesbian and gay people's stories and the realization that they were children of God as we all are.

Her present affirmation includes the possibility of marriage for loving couples of the same gender. There were other difficult and easy questions. The duly consti-

In this issue: Ordination, Spiritual Journey, Downscaling God, The Pastoral Covenant, Fall review, Spring Gathering, Gerry Harrop tributes.

tuted council passed the candidate and I rejoiced that it is possible to be in the BCOQ and be welcoming an affirming toward our lesbian and gay sisters and brothers. Her ordination is a witness to all of us that the BCOQ tent includes a variety of views on orientation despite the hard line taken by our present leadership to suppress such dissent.

Patricia wasn't asked if she planned to sign the "pastoral covenant" (see articles in this issue from Fred Demaray and Ray Hobbs). That may be an issue for another day.

The April Gathering in Ottawa promises to be a worthwhile event with an emphasis on peace and justice concerns with Lee McKenna duCharme and Gary Purdy facilitating our discussion. It is an opportunity to carry the Gathering message beyond southern Ontario.

Michael Steeves, Editor

My spiritual journey

In the last few years, and particularly in the last few months, I've been involved in a process of spiritual growth. So far, the result has been a dismantling and discarding of my childhood faith (yes, I admit I'm a late bloomer) in an attempt to build a mature spirituality.

While reading the works of modern scholars, I've experienced several phases. First, I felt a sense of relief that I'm not alone and that others have the same questions I do. Next, I despaired that my Christian education was just so much nonsense and that I had been raised on propaganda. Finally, I see on the horizon a place of calm, and yet mystery, as I uncover for myself the essence of Christianity. This is exciting, but also isolating, because I perceive sometimes that mainstream Christianity would no longer count the likes of me among its ranks.

The irony is, of course, that I know myself to be more Christian now than before. The Christianity of my youth was full of Biblical facts, rules for conduct, and the never-ending message of salvation and heavenly reward. I no longer accept these things by rote. I guess I'm in a

sort of purgatory, and by the time you read this, I'll probably be at a different pit stop along my journey. For now, removing the "domesticating lens" (a phrase I've picked up somewhere in my reading) of my youth has allowed me to see the Bible and Christianity as alive and vital, whereas before it was dull and stale.

Christianity is so much more, and less, than I thought. More, because the call to action is great. I can no longer passively cloak myself in the message of salvation. Less, because the concept of Bible as rule book has fallen away. I'm not a Christian because I follow certain rules and hold certain beliefs. I'm a Christian in accepting how thoroughly flawed I am by virtue of being human. I'm a Christian in seeking ways to transcend that humanness to become like Christ. I'm a Christian in responding to the radical Biblical cry to end oppression (no easy task, that). I'm a Christian in searching for truth.

Why are you a Christian? What does Christianity mean to you? Where are you on your spiritual journey? I hope we can share our stories in future issues of [Woodbine] *Highlights*.

- Michelle Schriver

(reprinted with permission from December 2004 Woodbine Highlights.)

Downscaling God

The recent, terrible disaster in South East Asia, which resulted in the loss of over 150,000 lives, and the devastation of regional infrastructures has received a theological examination in, of all places, the pages of the national newspaper, the Globe and Mail. Michael Valpy set the ball rolling with his brief examination of the reaction to the disaster of various religious leaders around the world.

The difficulty most of these leaders had was linking together several theological concepts - the omnipotence of God, the justice of God, the love of God, suffering of innocents, the nature of human sin, understanding creation, to name just a few.

It was almost painful to read the twists of logic that were employed to keep some form of faith in the traditional God alive in the light of vivid evidence challenging all of these concepts. To my mind they were all unsuccessful.

They were unsuccessful because they were dealing with the traditional image of God, filtered through the language and culture of a world that no longer exists. That world is the first century Mediterranean world which was used to kings, emperors, absolute power, territorial greed, and severe punishment of those who refused to go along for the ride. It is no small wonder that "god" is described with the same language. The God of the Bible is an all-powerful, capricious, jealous, at times petty, honour-seeking despot who punishes wrong doing, and turns his back on any form of dissent. In other words, he is a reflection of the prevailing political figures of the day.

At least the biblical writers, having subscribed to this image, were thoroughly honest and consistent in their understanding of how this works out in practice. Defeat in battle? We must have done something to tick God off. Loss of land? An angry God is punishing us. Premature death of a family member? God took him/her away - don't ask, don't tell. And, the most relevant, A Flood? God punished the world for sin, in much the same way as a slighted monarch sent his armies to punish rebellious neighbours. The results were the same - the land usually ended up devastated, and the people either dead or in slavery.

The motivation for persisting with this image of God is unknown. It does provide such believers with an explanation of wars, disasters, death and destruction. In public

discourse, however, the good things in life, such as the sacrificial dedication of a man like Stephen Lewis (an unbeliever, or non-religious person) to combat the worldwide AIDS crisis; the selflessness of millions of volunteers throughout the world, or just the plain ordinary goodness of some folk, are rarely attributed to the work of God. In my opinion, if they were, it might balance the scales a bit.

Now I would hate to see God depicted as a kind of celestial Paul Martin, Tony Blair or George W Bush. But it amuses me to note that a country, the United States, is home to a vast number of people who think of God as this kind of despot, yet, at the same time, it is a country which rejected monarchy in favour of a democratically appointed leader. Ideally, such a political system encourages discussion, rather than decree, and accountability, rather than self-referential diktats ("Thus saith the Lord...")

Maybe believers should consider this image option - a God who is willing to enter into discussion with creation on equal terms, and, above all, a God who is held accountable to humanity for what happens to it. Job comes close to demanding this, but eventually he is browbeaten into submission by the despotic God who appears in the closing chapters of the book. Because of this, Job seems to me to be the most unsatisfying of all the books of the Bible - allowing someone to question the ways of God, then providing him with no help whatsoever in finding answers. In fact, this is a dominant characteristic of God in the Bible. God is the Big Teaser.

Perhaps God should be downscaled. Our image of God could be one of a partner in creation and life, rather than an absolute and absentee monarch. It might not stop the disasters, but it probably won't stop giving and self sacrifice either. It would, however, give us the opportunity to wrestle more realistically with what happens in this world. As a true partner it might provide us with the need to examine our own roles in the kind of world we have created. It might suggest, as with the ideal democracy, that all of us, God included, have a joint responsibility for the world.

God, like us, would have to deal with the unexpected. But in so doing, would take us into confidence and suggest that we all need to build a better world together.

- Ray Hobbs

Letters are welcome at gnl@gatheringbaptists.ca, fax: (local Toronto) 416-922-4359 or by post to Michael Steeves, at 70 Linsmore Cr., Toronto ON M4J 4K1. Letters may be edited for clarity and length. Please include full name, address, phone number and email if applicable. Editorial Board: Michael Steeves - Editor, Cam Watts, Barbara Bishop, Colleen Furry, bob paterson-watt, Daphne L. Hunt (production).

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SPRING GATHERING



What would I change in my life to bring peace to the world?

The Gathering of Baptists. 30 April 2005.
First Baptist Church, Ottawa, Ontario.

**First Baptist Church
140 Laurier Avenue West
Ottawa ON K1P 5J4**

**Minister:
The Reverend Deborah Dempsey
Billeting and Accommodation:
613-234-3261**

Discussion Facilitators:



Lee McKenna duCharme, Programme Director, World Peace Networks, Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America trains and equips Baptists in non-violent conflict transformation.

Gary Purdy, Professor of Materials Science and Engineering at McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario



Registration starts at 8:30 a.m. followed by worship, morning session, lunch and afternoon session.

Cost is \$20 for the day and includes lunch.

To register, please contact bob paterson-watt at 50 Brunswick Ave., Kitchener ON N2H 4E8.

Tel. 416-467-1462

E-mail: registergb@gatheringbaptists.ca

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Fall 2004 Gathering at Yorkminster Park in review

On the invitation of Yorkminster Park Baptist Church Toronto, The Gathering of Baptists joined its Fall Gathering with The Lester Randall Preaching Fellowship, 30 October 2004.

Dr. Joseph Jeter of Brite Divinity School, Fort Worth Texas led the morning session with a lecture entitled "Dry and Famished," where we looked at the relationship between word and sacrament in the context of including everyone at the communion table.

At the end of the session, Dr Jeter invited people to share their communion/baptism stories. Joe Abbey-Colborne told his story about baptising Billy, a young gay man with a simple faith who later died of AIDS. Dr. Jeter's response was: "I had a call last spring from my niece who is a Unitarian Universalist pastor in California. She asked me if I would come and solemnize her marriage to her lesbian partner. I said 'Of course, I would be honoured.' She asked me if that would present a problem to the judicatory authorities of my denomination, and I told her that was their problem."

Unfortunately, our afternoon speaker, David Gregg of The Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists was unable to be with us. In his stead, Rev. Rick Mixon, the interim pastor of the First Baptist Church in Granville, Ohio shared with us what life is like ministering with gay and lesbian folk in a welcoming and affirming congregation. A gay man in a lifelong partnership, Rick brought healing and hope to the failing marriage of a fellow pastor and his wife.

He asked us which of our churches would be the first to become welcoming and affirming. Knowing how vulnerable a single church would be in taking the lead in coming forward, it is more likely a small group of churches would declare themselves at the same time to be welcoming and affirming.

Money, memberships and memorials

Good news - The Gathering of Baptists is solvent, albeit we swooped from \$1,260 to \$95 in the bank as the year 2004 progressed. But we have covered necessary fees and are incorporated now.

So we appeal for membership contributions (family membership a bargain at \$20 per year) Memberships and donations cover costs, like newsletters, website fees, mailings to churches, conference registrations, operating costs, such as incorporation costs and shortfalls of Gatherings, and donations like our in memoriam donations to The Gavel Fund.

We also gladly accept donations and are working on establishing charitable status to be able to advantageously receipt donations.

Until our corporate bank account is established, please make cheques payable to Gary Caldwell noted "The Gathering." Address: 2464 Concession 2 West, RR 1 Lynden ON L0R 1T0.

Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America "For the Healing of the Nations" 20th annual

Summer Conference/Peace Camp

August 1-6, 2005

Linfield College, McMinnville, Oregon USA.

Keynote Address: Marcus Borg

Preacher: Doris Garcia-Mayol

Bible Study Leader: Cam Watts

Plenary Speaker: Paul Dekar

Music: Michael Stern

Craig and Cindy Corrie, whose daughter, Rachel, was killed while nonviolently protesting destruction of a Palestinian home in the Gaza Strip will share their stories.

More details: www.bpfna.org

The "Pastoral Covenant" - 1

Now to the Pastoral Covenant and some of the issues it raises for me. I will not begin by thanking the writers for the time spent on this document, because it reflects an apparent hurried response to some perceived problem. If, as stated in the opening paragraphs, the problem is lack of awareness of the existing documents, perhaps the first step should be one of education for both the churches and the pastors about the current document. If that proves inadequate, then perhaps we need to move further.

I do not believe that the term covenant can be applied to the document being circulated. It is a code of ethical behaviour. A covenant is made between two parties with promises from both sides. A covenant is negotiated between the parties involved, not simply imposed by one side, except in the divine covenant as outlined in the Scriptures. Yet even in that covenant, God makes it with the People of God, but all of the promises come from God, not from the people, and God gives of God's self to the people without a pre-requirement of reciprocal self giving, only the hope expressed that it will happen. The Scriptural documentation of the living out of this covenant is that God is the one who seems held by it, and despite the many ways in which it is broken by the people, it is always God who "repents" and makes possible restitution and reconciliation.

The document we have before us is very much one sided, demanding only an ethical standard of the pastor. The original as found in the Manual for Worship and Service was more covenantal. It began with an outline of "Church-to-Pastor Ethics" and then moved to an outline of "Pastor-to-Church Ethics". It was offered as a model for churches and pastors to use in developing their relationship with each other, and would become a covenant when used in that "negotiation" of the relationship. In some thirty years of ministry, I have often been a listening ear for pastors who are having difficulty in relationship with their churches, not solely because they have failed to keep up their end of the bargain, but often because the churches were not aware of their ethical responsibility to the pastor, their covenantal relationship to the pastor. This is becoming even more pronounced in the current time when more churches seem to regard the process of call as that of "hiring a pastor" despite all our statements of the nature of call in the act of induction.

If we need to move beyond the suggested statements as offered in the Manual, and I think that those are fully adequate, we need to be sure that both sides of the equation are represented in whatever we produce.

In the suggested strategies for use of this new document, number three makes this document a covenant between the pastor and BCOQ. (Again, I would note, it does not outline BCOQ's responsibility to the pastors which would be expected in a covenant.) I was only in covenant with the BCOQ for four years of my ministry, the four years when I was an employee of the Convention. I have been in covenant

only with the five individual churches who called me to be a pastor among them. In fact, one of the reasons I have resisted the invitations to ministry in other denominations, as I have outlined to you, is precisely because in those the pastor is not in covenant with the local congregation, but with some ecclesiastical authority, presbytery, conference, synod or bishop. I have always cherished the covenantal relationship that is held between the congregation and the pastor in our tradition. Asking pastors to sign this document, which will then be kept in their file by the BCOQ, presumably as a tool to hold over them if they fail in any way to maintain the code outlined, is to ask them to be in relationship to the denomination, not to the church they are called to serve. I have no problem with reviewing the ethical aspects of ministry with those in preparation for ordination, nor with asking candidates for ministry within the BCOQ to adhere to the commitments outlined.

I believe that number 3 of the suggested strategies is another example of our moving away from the traditional distinctives of congregational autonomy, soul liberty (and responsibility) and the priesthood of all believers. It is a further sign that our denominational image of ourselves is more of the "head office" mentality that reflects a different understanding of "church" than we have held traditionally.

Again in this document, we are showing our current reoccupation with SEX. Item 4 was adequately covered in the first two items of the original as found in the Manual. By highlighting it we lift one area as having particular importance. If we are going to do that, we should list all of the seven deadly sins, at least. However, number 4 is covered by both 1 and 3 in the proposed document, so does not need particular mention in my humble opinion. This sounds more like a way of protecting the BCOQ rather than offering guidance to the pastors or churches. If we have to protect ourselves, "to save our life" so that we need to set up such legalistic codes, we will indeed "lose our life", in fact such documents make me wonder if we have not already lost our life as church family.

I hope that this document will be abandoned by the BCOQ, and that ways will be found to remind both church and pastor of the existing material, particularly at the time when they are in the process of negotiating a new call to pastoral ministry. If we do move forward with this plan, I for one would hesitate to "sign on" not because I could not live up to the expectations, but because my sense of who we are as Baptists resists any such commitment to outside bodies, especially when they be denominational bodies seeking to impose their own code on the life of us all.

I have copied John Torrance on this item as we have had an ongoing conversation about what I see as a continual erosion of our distinctives, particularly in the new structures we have recently adopted. I hope that you will accept this as offered in loving and deep concern for our life together as Baptists in Ontario and Quebec.

-Fred Demaray

The "Pastoral Covenant" - 2

Some initial responses to the document known as "The Pastoral Covenant". Probably, after more reflection, more words and thoughts will come.

First: In spite of its title, this is not a Covenant. Traditionally, covenants are documents drawn up between two parties after the establishment of a relationship. In the Ancient Near East, treaties (which are thought to be the basis for OT Covenants) were between two kings in either a relationship of parity (The two developing trading systems), or inequality (one having been defeated by the other in battle). This document is a set of 16 rules of behaviour, which are imposed by one party (BCOQ) on the others (Pastors and others in Ministry).

Second: I am always suspicious of the opening statement which is an anecdotal, and vague suggestion of a need. "It has become evident..." - by whom? In what manner? This is precisely the same way that the New Systems document was sold.

Third: The time lapse between the original date of the

document and its current, piecemeal distribution, is puzzling, if not troubling. "Why now?" is a useful, critical question to bear in mind.

Fourth: When institutions are in decline, documents regarding strategies, visions, loyalties, become very popular. In putting such things into documents, two things are avoided [1] the sense that nothing is being done; [2] the sense that the institution is in real trouble. On the other hand, the sense that real or imaginary problems are being addressed is perpetuated. But, the "textualizing" of such issues does nothing. The documents become a substitute for face to face dialogue and discussion of these issues.

Fifth: I have nothing against godly, honest, humble and efficient ministers (and everything they say). In fact, if all (Ministers and Layfolk) behaved like this it would be a good idea. Legislation is not the way to go about it.

Sixth: Documents such as this are usually created to protect the institution, especially when it wishes to act against certain of its members or adherents. I have seen this pattern at work for over fifteen years. Such documents then become instruments of power.

-Ray Hobbs

Dr. Gerry Harrop 1917-2005

Those of us who knew Gerry Harrop as a teacher and friend were touched by not just a breath of fresh air but a presence that was alive to the wonder of life and the source of it all. When asked when he was saved, Gerry reminded everyone of the truth: "At 3 p.m. on the first Good Friday!"

He was a pastor who cared for his students and their families and he believed we could all find our place in the service of the One we followed.

All great memories of a great man who helped me to be comfortable in my own skin. I will always cherish the privilege of having lived in his presence for the years I was at Mac [McMaster Divinity College] and being in relationship with the happiest man I ever knew.

- Rob Campbell

Some things we remember:

First year in WLTS took Religious Studies 102 (the gospels) from Dr. Gilmour, RS202 (Old Testament) from Dr. Harrop, and RS302 (New Testament) from Dr. Lang. This would have been 1953-54 and in those days no professor would have been called by his/her first name!

The RSV bible had just been released and we were using it as our text. One person wrote to the Hamilton Spectator that she had discovered 20 mistakes in the RSV. Gerry responded that he could find over 200. (I'm not sure of exact numbers, but the proportions are.)

In our second year Gerry was our NT professor, mainly dealing with the letters. His up-to-date illustrations of the situations described in the letters were always intriguing and to the point.

I believe he was an avid football fan and frequently invited the students to his home to watch a game on TV. My first viewing of a football game was at his home, a CFL game with the Winnipeg Bluebombers. I forget who the other team was.

Gerald had Gerry for New Testament Greek in a one person class. It was a very informal class!

We both count it a privilege to have had Dr. Gerald Harrop as professor!

- Kathrine & Gerald Hunt

Gerry was pastor at Forest, Ontario, and at First Baptist Church, Regina, SK before being invited on to the faculty at McMaster University in 1956 after receiving his PhD degree from the University of Chicago. His academic passions were Hebrew and the Prophets. After retirement in 1977 he continued to teach at several theological institutions on a part-time basis, and wrote several books on biblical and other topics.

Heather and I met Gerry, Freda and Cathy in 1968 in Switzerland, and in the following year I was invited to join the faculty of McMaster Divinity College. Gerry and Freda were our family away from home, and they became close friends. I was privileged to follow Gerry into the Chair of Old Testament and Hebrew in 1977.

Gerry was beloved by so many, and an irritant to those who deserved it. Bless him and his memory.

- Ray Hobbs