

FROM INDIVIDUAL SALVATION TO COLLECTIVE SHALOM
Great Lakes Conference BIC U.S. Fan into Flame (September 2024)
Tuesday September 3 - 7:00pm EST / 6:00pm CST
Wednesday September 4 – 2:00pm EST / 1:00pm CST

The doctrine of salvation has rightly held a place of importance throughout the life of the church. In our present time, Christians of many sorts unfortunately hold to a privatized view of salvation – that God is saving people *from* a world that is on the path to destruction. The Scriptural view of salvation is far more comprehensive, incorporating the restoration of human dignity, the redemption of the earth, and the establishing of justice as part of God’s reign arriving *on earth as it is in heaven*. Scripture invites God’s people to this work of *shalom* through many means, including fellowship with the downtrodden, service, and social advocacy in pursuit of wholeness in our world. This session is designed to explore the Bible’s holistic view of redemption as *collective shalom* and to equip pastors for bringing this good news of new creation to their congregations.

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THEOLOGICAL MATTERS

I. SHALOM & GOD’S VISION FOR CREATION

The Scriptural concept of peace is comprehensive in its scope. Although it assumes the absence of warfare and inner turmoil, it goes beyond these dynamics to include thriving communities and full dignity for human beings created in God’s image. In the original languages of the Scriptures, this concept is best described by two terms:

- Hebrew term **שָׁלוֹם** (*shalom*): broad range of potential meanings, including a sense of completeness, wholeness, intactness, or welfare.¹
- Greek term **εἰρήνη** (*eirene*): peace, harmony (in personal relationships & between societies). Used throughout the Septuagint as the translation for *shalom*. Used in the New Testament.²

Speaking about these concepts of peace, theologian Henri Nouwen writes:

“[God’s] peace doesn’t mean only absence of war. It is not simply harmony or equilibrium. ... Peace is shalom – well-being of mind, heart, and body, individually and communally. It can exist in the midst of a war-torn world, even in the midst of unresolved problems and increasing human conflicts.”

Henri J.M. Nouwen, excerpt from: *Following the Call: Living the Sermon on the Mount Together* (Charles E. Moore, editor). Plough Publishing House, 2021: page 8.

Nouwen’s stress on individual and communal *well-being* is important. Our modern American context tends to view peace in a negative sense as the absence of conflict. But the Biblical vision focuses on the presence of well-being.³ In addition, American society is obsessed with the myth of the “rugged individualist” who needs no help to actualize their own well-being. The effect of this myth in our society has been an equating of personal/individual well-being with peace, at the expense of communal well-being. By contrast the Biblical concept places communal and individual well-being alongside each other. Individuals cannot thrive without

¹ Ludwig Koehler et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994–2000), 1506–1510.

² William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 287–288.

³ An effect of *shalom* can be the absence of conflict, but it need not always follow. Communities built around the pursuit of peace together can successfully navigate challenges through their commitment to one another, and therefore avoid unnecessary conflict. But there will always be diversity of opinion and perspective within community, and (healthy) conflict should not be avoided. The difference is that disagreement grounded in the pursuit of peace becomes an opportunity to explore ways to move forward in unity rather than enter into hostility.

their communities also thriving. And communities only truly thrive in just social circumstances where all individuals can experience well-being.

God's vision of shalom is found throughout the Scriptures. It is the vision found in the very fabric of creation, which God declared "good" as all things assumed their proper place, the capstone of which was humanity (Genesis 1-2). It is the hope of the prophets who called the people to repentance for their exploitation of the poor, to a world where lion and lamb lay together and where swords are beaten into plowshares (Isaiah 2, 11, 61). We see it in the ministry of Jesus and in calls for the earliest churches to pursue peace and unity with one another. And it is the picture of new creation where the city (which is God's people) houses leaves for the healing of the nations (Revelation 21-22).

II. SHALOM IN THE MINISTRY OF JESUS

The Brethren in Christ *hermeneutic* begins with Jesus, who provides both the authoritative interpretation of the Scriptures as well as the precise reflection of God the Father's own character. For this reason, we will begin our survey of *shalom* by looking at what Jesus has to say about salvation in his own ministry.

The first narrated event of Jesus's public ministry in the Gospel of Luke occurs in Nazareth. Prior to this event Jesus was baptized "and the Holy Spirit descended on him" (Luke 3:21). Then "full of the Holy Spirit" he "was led by the Spirit into the wilderness" (Luke 4:1) where he overcame the temptations of Satan. After this he arrives in Galilee "in the power of the Spirit" and reads the famous passage from the prophet Isaiah that begins with the words "The Spirit of the Lord is on me" (Luke 4:14-18). This fourfold reference to the Holy Spirit fits with Luke's wider emphasis on the Spirit in the ministry of Jesus and the life of God's people. And it is at this pivotal event in the Nazareth synagogue that Jesus defines what the Spirit-empowered ministry is all about:

Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him. He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

Luke 4:14-21 (NIV)

In this text we see that the Spirit-empowered ministry of Jesus revolved around the theme of “the year of the Lord’s favor,” manifested in the proclamation of good news to the poor, freedom to prisoners, healing for the blind, and freedom for the oppressed. Some scholars have proposed that in these words Jesus declared a jubilee year, in which debts were to be forgiven.⁴ This message is not the *privatized* view of salvation so popular in much of Protestant Evangelicalism, where God rescues individuals out of a world set on the path to destruction. Instead, it embraces a view of transformative justice that restores those oppressed by Satan and the social systems of the world that he has infected.

Later in the Gospel John the Baptist sends his disciples to inquire as to whether Jesus is truly the Messiah (Luke 7:18-23). John evidently expected something different, believing that the Messiah’s primary work was one of judgment.⁵ Jesus’s response to this question is telling:

“Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”

Luke 7:22-23 (NIV)

Here Jesus tells John (and Luke reminds the readers) that Jesus’s messianic ministry was one involving healing and restoration, especially for those often forgotten by the wider society. This work is a component of judgment, of setting wrongs right and restoring shalom in the spheres where it has been lost. In a sense, John the Baptist’s apparent belief that the Messiah would “gather the wheat into his barn” and “burn up the chaff” was correct. Yet like most of his day he was unable to imagine that God’s judgment would manifest in his lifetime in the restorative work that marked much of Jesus’s ministry. A few other comments are worth noting:

⁴ André Trocmé, *Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution*, pages 13–42.

⁵ Earlier in the Gospel John the Baptist describes the Messiah as one who “will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Luke 3:16-17). This fiery imagery reflects a belief that the Messiah’s primary role was to enact justice through the gathering of the righteous and the judgment of the wicked.

The Prophetic Background to Jesus's Ministry

Jesus's declaration that "*The Spirit of the Lord is on me*" is an excerpt from Isaiah 61. The prophet's vision was of a time of renewal, rebuilding, and of justice. Tied to "the day of the Lord's favor" where Jesus stopped reading is "the day of vengeance of our God" (61:2), a time where mourning is exchanged for comfort, where ashes are replaced with beauty, and where despair gives way to praise. In this worldview, shalom is restored in the land both through God's lifting up of the poor/oppressed, and through his judgment of evil. In the middle of this vision, we see another promise declared: "And you will be called priests of the Lord, you will be named ministers of our God" (61:6). The priestly mission of God's people is tied up with the promise of shalom in the land and across the earth. This is a promise delivered to all of God's people, including the poor, prisoners, the blind, the outcast, and the oppressed. "All who see them will acknowledge that they are a people the Lord has blessed" (61:9). This process of making a priestly people is a part of God's work to establish shalom and justice upon the earth. The conclusion of this vision reads as follows:

"For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause *righteousness* and praise to spring up before all the nations."

Isaiah 61:11 (NIV)

Like shalom, "righteousness" is a more comprehensive concept than we tend to assume, with elements of moral standing, right relationships, justice, and more depending on the context. It is perhaps best to view such language as focused on the restoration of right relationships. These concepts are not always carried through to readers who might view "righteousness" as a sort of abstract quality. But a look at the key terms in the Biblical languages makes clearer the range of potential meanings in Isaiah's words:

- Hebrew term **צְדָקָה** (*tsadaqah*): loyalty to a community (of God and of humanity), justice (including the elimination of evil and the preservation of good), justness (setting things to right).⁶
- Greek term **δικαιοσύνη** (*dikaiousune*): judicial responsibility, juridical correctness, upright behavior, equitableness, responsibility within a social context.⁷

As you can see, there are several ways to define these terms. This is why "righteousness" can be used to describe God's upright character (Romans 1:17) and the act of almsgiving (Matthew 6:1). But in each of these cases, righteousness is not an abstract quality. It is something that is manifested through actions. God is righteous because he simultaneously punishes sin while forgiving sinners. Jesus asks his followers to practice righteousness by giving to the poor. We do

⁶ *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 1006.

⁷ *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 247-249.

a disservice to the Scriptures when we limit *righteousness* to abstract concepts of uprightness. In fact, it might be better for us to translate this term as “justice,” a word that has not lost the relational component of its meaning. In his book *Justice: Rights and Wrongs*, philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff dedicates three whole chapters to a discussion of how modern Western audiences have lost the proper framework for biblical concepts of righteousness and justice. Wolterstorff writes:

The New Testament is all about justice. Or to express myself a bit more cautiously and precisely: justice, along with its negative, injustice, is one of the main themes in the New Testament – *real* justice and *real* injustice, not some spiritual counterpart thereof. In this world of ours, persons are wronged, justice is breached. That is the ever-present context of the New Testament writings. Sometimes the writers bring this context to the fore; often they take it for granted. From their location within that context they speak about the coming of justice, about the struggle against injustice, about judgment on breaches of justice, and about forgiveness for such breaches.

Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs*, chapter 4.

We see then that Scriptural language about righteousness and about justice emerges from situations in which shalom, human well-being, has been denied. And so, when we speak of the righteousness that Isaiah foresaw, and which Jesus preached, we speak of the restoration of wholeness and of right relationships, the bringing of shalom into places where the creation has been marred by sin and Satan.

Satan & Systemic Evil

An important part of theological background for Jesus’s ministry is the view that his work involved the overthrow of Satan, who had infected the kingdoms of the world.⁸ Satan himself claims to have authority over the kingdoms of the world when tempting Jesus in the wilderness:

The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, “I will give you all their authority and splendor; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. If you worship me, it will all be yours.”

Luke 4:5-7 (NIV)

One way of thinking about this dynamic is that evil has affected the world at both individual and *systemic* levels. Their authority and splendor, meant to promote human dignity and human flourishing, instead serve as means to dominate and oppress human beings created in God’s

⁸ For similar concepts, see 2 Corinthians 4:4; Ephesians 2:2; Colossians 1:13; 1 John 5:19; etc.

image. These systems, much like individuals themselves, are therefore in need of repentance and renewal. And such work is carried out through confrontation by the kingdom of God.⁹ We see this dynamic in play with Jesus's own ministry. At numerous points the claim is made that his work was to confront the kingdom of darkness and bring the kingdom of God in its place. When accused while driving out demons, he declared that this work was the plundering of Satan's storerooms (Luke 11:20-21). In response to similar work by his disciples, Jesus proclaimed the overthrow of Satan (Luke 10:17-20). His death on the cross was also described as a decisive judgment over Satan (John 12:31-32).

Physical Healing & Social Restoration

The types of people described in the Isaian "mission statements" by Jesus are important. In the ancient world, the blind, the lame, the deaf, those with leprosy, and the poor were considered more than just disadvantaged, but in some senses deficient as human beings. Think for example of the story in John 9, where the disciples assumed that a man was blind because either he or his parents had sinned. Various diseases and ailments, including skin diseases, blindness, and deafness were seen as punishments from God in response to violations of the covenant (Numbers 12; Deuteronomy 28). Skin diseases (Leviticus 13-14) and bodily discharges (Leviticus 15) also put people into a state of ritual impurity and therefore limited their access to the Temple and to other people, lest their impurity spread. Throughout history a recurring lie about the poor has suggested that poverty is the result of laziness or poor choices, as opposed to circumstances outside of an individual's control.

All of this is to suggest that Jesus's work included miraculous *healing* of physical and spiritual ailments alongside miraculous *restoration* of people to society. A man healed of a skin disease was to present himself in the temple, a place of God's presence from which he was excluded (Luke 5:12-16). Recall also the story of the Gerasene demoniac in Mark 5. This was a man who lived among the tombs and who had often been restrained with chains. Jesus delivered this man from the legion of evil spirits, a genuine miracle. Yet afterwards he tells the man, "Go home to your own people" (Mark 5:19). The work of this miracle was incomplete until the man returned home restored and testifying to the year of the Lord's favor as found in Jesus. Similar wording can be found in the story of the woman caught in adultery. The story concludes with Jesus telling the woman "go and sin no more" (John 8:11), wording that might prompt us to place an emphasis on the "sin no more" part of the equation. But equal emphasis should be placed on the word "go." Jesus challenged her accusers, publicly affirmed her dignity as a human being, and releases her to return to her home. What we see emerge in these words and actions is a ministry to the disadvantaged and deprived of his day that involved the restoration of human dignity.

⁹ Such confrontation ought to be carried out in keeping with the values of the kingdom. Satan's declaration that the "authority and splendor" of the world's kingdoms belonged to him should serve as a warning to God's people that tools of oppression cannot be used to counteract the kingdom of darkness. Instead, this work must be done following the example of Jesus, who brought restoration and reconciliation through prophetic critique and healing.

III. THE CHURCH AS JESUS'S PRIESTLY PEOPLE

After his ascension, Jesus entrusts his continuing ministry to his followers, empowered by the same Spirit to continue proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor.¹⁰ One of the most common Scriptural images of this work is best summarized by Peter:

"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."

1 Peter 2:9 (NIV)

The language of "royal priesthood" and "holy nation" goes very far back in the Scriptures. This was the identity given to the people of Israel after God delivered them from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 19:4-6). It was found in the prophecy of Isaiah 61 that Jesus quoted at the start of his public ministry (Luke 4; see above). This identity is reaffirmed for the people of God (Jew and Gentile) who choose to follow Jesus. Through his death and resurrection, we have become a part of God's special possession – "a people for his name ... that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who bear my name" (Acts 15:14–17). Jesus is praised by the heavenly choirs because with his blood he "purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation [and] made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth" (Revelation 5:9-10).

Such priestly imagery stresses two factors of the work of the church: they *serve God* and *declare* to others. They are an "in between" people whose service to God is carried out in service and witness to others. They promote shalom well-being where it is lacking, foster communities centered around Jesus and his ministry of restoration, and to walk in partnership with the oppressed and downtrodden in the pursuit of peace.

¹⁰ For the image of the church as Jesus's "body" see: Ephesians 1:22-23; Colossians 1:17-18; etc. On the idea that the church will engage in the works that characterized Jesus's earthly ministry, see: John 14:11-14; etc.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

These resources are good places to explore the topics discussed in this presentation, both from Brethren in Christ U.S. perspectives and from authors outside of our theological tradition.

Brethren in Christ U.S. Publications:

- Manual of Doctrine & Government:
 - Articles of Faith & Doctrine (especially *Article V: The Holy Spirit & The Church*)
 - Statements of Christian Life & Practice (especially *The Christian & Society*)
- Accents & Issues:
 - Christians & War
 - Holy Living
 - Renewal
 - Simple Lifestyle
 - Violence
- BIC U.S. website & blog

Affiliated Resources/Publications:

- Brethren in Christ Historical Society
- Brethren in Christ History & Life
- Shalom! A Journal for the Practice of Reconciliation
- “Deeper” Theological Resources at TheSeed.online

Shalom! A Journal for the Practice of Reconciliation (selected issues)

- *The Least of These*. vol. 44.1 (Winter 2024): <https://bicus.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/shalom-winter2024.pdf>
- *Do Justice, Love Mercy, Walk Humbly*. vol. 44.3 (Summer 2023): <https://bicus.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/shalom-summer2023.pdf>
- *Pursuing Peace in a World of Conflict*. vol. 42.2 (Spring 2022): <https://bicus.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/shalom-spring2022-2.pdf>
- *The Economics of Justice*. vol. 41.3 (Summer 2021): <https://bicus.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/shalom-summer2021.pdf>

The archive of recent issues of *Shalom: A Journal for the Practice of Reconciliation* is available on the BIC U.S. website at: <https://bicus.org/resources/publications/shalom/shalom-archive/>

BIC U.S. Articles & Blog Posts:

- Kerry Hoke, “Reflections on Micah 6:8” *BIC U.S. Blog* (October 12, 2023): <https://bicus.org/2023/10/reflections-on-micah-68/>
- Jennifer Lancaster, “How is Our Plumb Line?” *BIC U.S. Blog* (November 12, 2021): <https://bicus.org/2021/11/how-is-our-plumb-line/>
- Zach Spidel, “Downward Mobility” *BIC U.S. Blog* (July 20, 2017): <https://bicus.org/2017/07/downward-mobility/>

Fan into Flame (September 2024): *From Individual Salvation to Collective Shalom*

- Ryan Stockton, “What is Our Role?” *BIC U.S. Blog* (May 29, 2024): <https://bicus.org/2024/05/what-is-our-role/>

Books:

- *The Prophetic Imagination* (Walter Brueggemann)
- *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (Richard Hays)
- *Generous Justice: How God’s Grace Makes Us Just* (Timothy Keller)
- *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* (Martin Luther King Jr.)
- *What Does Justice Look Like and Why Does God Care About It?* (Judith McCartney & Colin McCartney)
- *Churches That Make a Difference: Reaching Your Community with Good News and Good Works* (Ronald J. Sider, et al.)
- *Soaring Hope: Imagining Life as it Ought to Be* (Lynn Thrush)
- *Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution* (André Trocmé)
- *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Nicholas Wolterstorff)

Shalom!

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The Least of These

AS I'VE BEEN trying to navigate the political minefields in the United States coming into a highly fraught election year, I've been drawn to Jesus's parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25. We have generally interpreted this passage mostly in terms of our personal and perhaps congregational responses to people who are hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick, or in prison. When and how have we personally been Jesus or not been Jesus to the people in need among us?

Perhaps it is worth noting, however, that the parable is set in the time when "the Son of Man [Jesus] comes in his glory," and all the nations of the world are gathered around him. While Jesus separates the people from all the nations into sheep and goats, I've wondered if there is any significance to their also being part of individual nations. And then, I've wondered whether there is any application of the story Jesus tells to those nations. What would it look like if nations would minister to "the least of these" also?

During this election year, what if we measured candidates for public office according to how they propose to address human need with policies that address the real needs of the hungry, thirsty, stranger, sick, naked, and prisoner? Who best exemplifies a real desire and has plans to create a system that addresses food insecurity, provides access to clean water and affordable health care for all, develops just and empathetic immigration policies, builds affordable housing, and treats people who have

committed crimes fairly and compassionately? Which candidates care more about creating policies that embrace the kind of justice and compassion described in this parable in Matthew 25? Individual acts of mercy, absolutely essential as they are, don't always address the systemic issues that have helped to perpetuate poverty, hunger, access to clean water, and so on.

With all those questions in mind, I invited writers for this edition of *Shalom!* to write about personal and congregational ministries to "the least of these," and others who would address how changes in public policy could alleviate some of their long-term needs. Through the ten articles in this edition, I'm trying to suggest that practicing compassion as individuals and congregations AND advocating for changes in public policy are both important parts of being Jesus to "the least of these."

About a month ago as I write this, we again celebrated Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday. In 1968 in a speech at the National Cathedral, he said, "We shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." That arc is looking particularly long right now, and it's easy to despair that justice will never come. But Jesus's parable of the sheep and the goats gives us something of a roadmap for how we can help to bring about justice in our local communities and more broadly in and among nations.

Harriet S. Bicksler, editor

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Changing Systems to Serve the Least of These

By Curtis Book

THE BIBLICAL IMPERATIVE of the law, the prophets, and Jesus is that faithful obedience requires God's people to love God and neighbor. This command is not an option; it's a biblical mandate. Jesus in his parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31ff is clear: by loving the least of these people, you love God and Jesus.

Therefore, we must care for the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, the stranger, the naked and the prisoner. The question then becomes, what are we doing individually and corporately to meet human need? Holistic aid needs to pour the oil of human kindness on both the cause and the effect of misery. Many times, we limit our local church efforts to such things as a food pantry, a health

clinic, or after school tutoring. These ministries are effective ways of addressing individual brokenness, but our mandate to love the least, the last, and the lost must also address the deeper systemic causes behind human suffering. Why are people hungry, thirsty, poor, and incarcerated? The answer needs to probe beyond individual acts of kindness to the broader systemic issues behind poverty and incarceration.

Allow me to share some of my story towards an understanding of the deeper systemic issues. As a missionary in both Africa and Latin America while doing pastoral leadership training for more than twenty years, I began to wrestle with the root cause of human suffering behind corporate sin. I began to ponder the reasons for the haves and have nots, the rich and the poor, the human egoism and tribalism that protect individuals and groups at the expense of others. Not only do bad individual choices cause human suffering, but also the systems into which people are born.

An eye opener for me was listening to African professionals who fled for their lives from white Rhodesia to London, England prior to Zimbabwe's independence in 1980. Many of them grew up in Brethren in Christ schools and churches, but they felt criticized by the church for engaging in opposition politics. The Brethren in Christ Church in Rhodesia tried to be apolitical in the independence struggle, but the feeling of these activists was that the Rhodesian government was based on white supremacy and injustice that did not have their interests at heart. Because I grew up as a boy in colonial Rhodesia, hearing this was eye-opening. For the first time in my life, I heard the story of those who were disenfranchised by the oppressive white government.

This led me to the conviction that part of my Christian duty is to listen to and understand the perspective of those who suffer even though I don't always agree. I started a journey whereby I resolved that faithful missional discipleship involves three steps: get near the pain, feel the pain, and then heal the

pain through Jesus Christ. These redemptive steps go beyond social justice to spiritual transformation of a new creation, but at the very least they form the basis for understanding the pain of human suffering.

We need more than knowledge, however, about the root cause of corporate sin. We must begin to address systemic evil if we are going to love the least of these. To do so, I quickly realized that we have to work with other Christians to heal the pain. This is why loving our neighbor can never be only individual acts of kindness. We must organize and work together as churches and denominations toward a collective response. Together we can make a difference. This is what advocacy is all about.

This reminds me of the Vietnam War and how the church responded. As the war dragged on, and the public became aware of the humanitarian crisis caused by the war, there were growing protests against the war including many students from Messiah College. At the time, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) was working in Vietnam seeking to address the humanitarian crisis. Protests and humanitarian assistance didn't seem to be enough. There was growing awareness that the root of the problem was the United States government's support of South Vietnam against the communist government of North Vietnam. The conviction that the church must do more to address the causes of the war led to the beginning of the MCC Washington Office in July 1968. MCC workers in Vietnam concluded that what they were doing was not particularly effective and perhaps hypocritical if they didn't also address the US involvement in the war. Many in the church realized that in order to love the least of these in Vietnam, they needed to speak out against the US government's foreign policy in Vietnam. Political advocacy is one of the responses Christians need to employ.

Remember the three steps: get near the pain, feel the pain, heal the pain. I am convinced that even if we are committed to loving our neighbor, we will never get far if we



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are distant from those who suffer systemic injustice. We must get near. We must be committed to not only learning their story but also feeling the effects of the injustices in their lives. What does the Scripture say: “Weep with those who weep, mourn with

those who mourn.” Then by working together with others, we will be able to heal the pain, pouring the oil of divine kindness and grace on the suffering caused by human sin and misery.

Curtis Book previously served as peace and justice coordinator for MCC East Coast and is currently the Africa regional administrator for Brethren in Christ U.S. World Missions. He and his wife attend the Lancaster (PA) Brethren in Christ Church.

An Anchor for Hungry and Unsheltered Guests

by *Patty Eastep*

AT ANCHOR LANCASTER, we are present every weekday morning to show the love of Christ while being an anchor in the lives of those who come to our door.

With a deeply rooted history in Lancaster City, Anchor Lancaster was started by a ladies Bible Study group at St. James Episcopal Church. After three decades of serving a continental breakfast to our hungry neighbors, the program relocated to First United Methodist Church just a short walk down the street. Within the first year at the new location the program became a private 501c3 nonprofit organization.

Fast forward seven years. . . . Kingdom work at Anchor Lancaster consists of serving a hot buffet breakfast every weekday morning, fifty-two weeks a year to anyone who is hungry. The kitchen offers an array of breakfasts, and the menu is varied and flavorful using the resources we obtain mostly from the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank.

In 2023, Anchor Lancaster received more than 60,000 pounds of food from the food bank. Favorites for our guests include scrambled eggs and fried potatoes with biscuits or toast. On average we crack and scramble 35-40 dozen eggs a day and use forty pounds of potatoes. Breakfast includes fruit, cereal, juice, milk, and of course coffee. Each morning eight to ten volunteers assist with preparing the meal, serving, and clean-up. Volunteers are the backbone of Anchor Lancaster, and we are grateful for more than sixty volunteers who gave 6,450 hours in the kitchen in 2023.

In the early years of Anchor Lancaster, order and discipline in the breakfast area was performed by a detective agency that felt like police/military discipline enforcers. There was tension among our guests. Now a new provider was hired who dresses in company

polo shirts and khaki slacks. The change in the atmosphere was immediate, and our guests benefit from a discipline that is offered with mercy and grace.

As we listened to our neighbors and learned about some of their hurdles, Anchor Lancaster began offering showers to our unsheltered neighbors two days a week. The shower program has since grown to a five-day-a-week program, offering 5,000 showers in 2023. Those who use the shower program are given a bath towel, wash cloth, a toiletry kit, and when available a new pair of socks, underwear, and a T-shirt.

Showers offer basic dignity and respect to our neighbors. Additionally, a warm shower allows our guests to present well at housing, employment, and medical appointments. We often see a lift in the spirits of our guests when they emerge from their shower. One guest told me after their shower, “Miss Patty, I feel like a real person again.”

In 2023, Anchor Lancaster saw a 17 percent increase in meals served and a 25 percent increase in showers, for a total of 35,000 meals and 5,000 showers.

Offering a warm safe haven, Anchor Lancaster opened a winter warming day center in 2021 for our unsheltered neighbors. During our first winter we provided services to two hundred unique individuals. Those who came were not only offered a safe, warm, and dry environment, but had use of a restroom, the opportunity to charge their phones and work with community service providers. A guest requested a pair of socks one cold, wet January day, which I was able to provide for her. She removed her boots and began peeling wet paper towels off her feet and slipped her feet into the dry socks. Small acts of kindness such as these are huge Jesus moments!!

In the summer of 2023, we also opened a summer day center, a place for our unsheltered neighbors to escape the summer heat. In 2023, we also welcomed our first case manager to our staff. During the first ten months, case management assisted 140 unique individuals with writing resumes, applying for employment, housing issues, transportation, and connecting to other needed services such as medical services and rehab facilities.

Anchor Lancaster does not just collaborate with multiple agencies within and around Lancaster County, but is itself an epicenter for various organizations to pool their knowledge, together for the betterment of our low-income and unsheltered guests. We are delighted to partner with a growing number of medical providers who are present at breakfast two or three days a week. Guests who are often leery of or unable to access medical care have the opportunity to see a medical professional in a familiar setting. Additionally, drug rehab service providers gather during the breakfast hours to offer assistance to our guests. A local hair stylist has also provided free haircuts to our guests multiple times. All of our weekday services are free to our guests.

Living out Matthew 25, Anchor Lancaster welcomes strangers to be our guests, providing for the hungry and the thirsty, while ministering to other essential needs.

Patty Eastep is a member of Branch and Vine, a Brethren in Christ congregation in Lancaster, PA.

A World Without Hunger

by Andrea Falano

WE LIVE IN the space between the world as it is and the world as it should be. That is a challenging tension to live in, and requires us to hold two truths. First, we must acknowledge, learn about, and understand the poverty that exists in our fallen world, and not numb or distract ourselves from it. Second, we must hold onto the hope of the Kingdom to come, including not giving up on working towards it now. In this space in between, we partner with God in his redemptive work.

For me, that is through advocacy with Bread for the World (“Bread”). Bread is a Christian advocacy organization that works to address hunger in the US and abroad through federal policy. Our mission is to educate and equip people of faith to advocate for policies and programs that can help end hunger.

Bread for the World was started almost fifty years ago by a pastor, Art Simon, whose church was feeding the hungry in the Lower East Side of New York City. Our current President, Pastor Eugene Cho, describes Simon’s vision well: “the three ideas he had in the founding of Bread: To prevent hunger from happening in the first place rather than just reacting to it; to work within the system of American democracy to ensure political leaders hear about hunger from their constituents; and to organize Christians to speak up collectively against hunger.”

At Bread, we envision a world without hunger. That is the picture of the world as it should be. But how about the world as it is? We know that there is more than enough food produced in the world to feed everyone on the planet, and yet, as many as 783 million people go hungry world-wide. The US is not immune from the issue of hunger. According to the USDA, in 2022, 17.3 percent of households with children in the US were food insecure, with 18.5 percent of children themselves food insecure. That equates to more than seven million children.

The term food insecurity is an official way to label hunger, and it means that the ability of a person to acquire adequate food is lim-

ited, with uncertainty over where the next meal will come from. The numbers are staggering at a global and national level, but it can be even harder to know that food insecurity exists in our own communities. All fifty states, all 435 congressional districts, and all 3,143 counties have people who experience food insecurity. As churches, I encourage us to know our communities well. What are the struggles our neighbors are facing? Who is experiencing hunger? What does poverty look like in our area, and what are some of the causes of it?

And then, let’s work to feed those people. At Bread, we like to think of direct service as one foot, and advocacy as the other. We can meet people’s needs locally through direct meals, and we can advocate to effect change in the systems around us to ensure more people are fed.

US policies and programs impact the lives of people in the US and in every corner of the world. An example of legislation is the Farm Bill, a large, multifaceted piece of legislation that helps shape local, regional, national and global food systems, and Bread advocates for a Farm Bill that builds healthy, equitable, and sustainable food systems.

One of my favorite programs in the Farm Bill is the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (“GusNIP”). It doubles up a person’s food benefits when used to purchase fresh fruit and vegetables, and is especially used at farmers’ markets. Not only has this program had proven results on the amount of healthy food a person consumes, but it also changes the local food systems and creates access to healthy foods. Many areas experiencing poverty lack access to nutritious food, what we call “food deserts.” GusNIP incentivizes farmers’ markets to come to certain areas they wouldn’t otherwise, for farmers to participate in those markets, and for farmers to continue to grow those healthy foods.

GusNIP is a proven example of how advocacy works. Bread representatives have educated their representatives on this program and asked them to support it, with the end

result of having strong support across the political spectrum. We get to witness true bipartisan cooperation take place in order to feed people.

The relationship between advocacy and faith is often discussed in two ways: we are motivated by our faith to engage in advocacy, and Christians can bring benefit to public spaces through advocacy. Both of these things are true, but I think they miss the heart of the matter. Advocacy is discipleship, and our engagement with it should transform our hearts and our character to more align with Christ. As we come alongside the oppressed and the outcast of society, as Jesus did, we should be moved by them, learn about God’s love through them, and love them ourselves as Jesus does. Indeed, if we engage in political action or advocacy, and we do not have love for our neighbor and our community and the “least of these,” our words are only “a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.”

While Bread is ecumenical, for me it is our Brethren in Christ identity that creates the space for me to engage in this work. I can be firmly rooted in the understanding that my obedience is to Christ Jesus as King, not a political party, but I can also take seriously the call of Jesus to step into spaces of poverty and engage in work to redeem our systems and community. I can follow Jesus’s words to feed the hungry, but also know that Jesus is the Bread of Life.

Andrea Falano is the state organizer for Bread for the World of Pennsylvania. She attends the Meeting House—Carlisle.

Compassion for People in Prison

By Laura Pauls-Thomas



LAMAR OBERTON, MEMBER of Freedom Church in Philadelphia, came to a Martin Luther King Jr. Service Day event in Philadelphia to honor her brother, who is in prison.

Mass incarceration was the focus of the event, sponsored by Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) East Coast and Kingdom Builders Network (KBN). Participants packed 560 care kits for incarcerated men and women and listened to a panel of experts talk about medical and mental health issues in Philadelphia prisons.

“I really find a passion in my heart to give to those who are struggling,” said Oberton. “It’s important to me to be here because when I see these people [volunteering], I think of my brother.”

ChiChi Oguekwe, Philadelphia program coordinator for MCC East Coast and coordinator of the seventh annual event, said, “There are so many individuals and families who are impacted by incarceration. This is an opportunity to remind them that we have hope for them and that we care about them.”

Janice Barbour, member of Christian Stronghold Baptist Church in Philadelphia, said that she was looking online for opportunities to serve locally and prayed for God to lead her to the right MLK (Martin Luther King Jr.) event.

“I have a difficult time with this whole prison industrial complex, from the point of being a victim of crime to being related to people who have been incarcerated. It’s just so multifaceted, and I struggle with how to really be useful in it . . . so, I think that’s why God directed me here.”

MCC shares Barbour’s concern about mass incarceration in the US—the substantial rise in incarceration rates since the late 1960s. The US is home to 5 percent of the world’s population and 25 percent of its prisoners. Nationwide, more than two million people are contained in US prisons and jails—an increase of 500 percent the last forty years, according to the Sentencing Project.

Philadelphia event panelists spoke about the need for medical and mental health justice in Philadelphia prisons, where they described the difficulty of long lockdowns and barriers to accessing hygiene items, showers, books and the law library due to short-staffing. They said conditions are unsanitary and unsafe, especially for those with documented health conditions and disabilities.

They also presented tangible solutions, including encouraging churches to nurture the leadership skills of formerly incarcerated people who are returning home. They urged individuals to educate themselves, vote in elections, and do their research on candidates. They also called for an end to cash bail, funding for community groups, and requirements for law enforcement officers to live within the same communities they police.

In Philadelphia and in other US locations, MCC walks with communities who have been targeted by the mass incarceration system, working toward healing, justice, and

restoration. MCC also provides care for those in prison and those returning to society by providing kits with basic clothing and hygiene supplies. This is part of MCC’s mission to share God’s love and compassion for all in the name of Christ.

In Elkhart, Indiana, MCC’s Great Lakes region partners with the Center for Community Justice by providing coaching and mentorship to men and women who are currently or formerly incarcerated. MCC Great Lakes also partners with other organizations in Elkhart, Chicago, Illinois, and Lexington, Kentucky to support people affected by incarceration.

In Kansas, MCC’s Central States region partners with Working Men of Christ by providing returning citizen care kits and with Offender Victim Ministries by providing prisoner care kits. These kits help meet the basic needs of those who are incarcerated or are turning to their communities.

“Going through the [prison] system, it often feels as if you’re going through it alone, and so this is a really special day for me,” says Jeffrey Abramowitz. He was incarcerated in a federal prison for five years and now serves as the chief executive officer of the Petey Greene Program, an educational program that helps people inside and outside prison to reach their academic and professional goals. Joining with others to pack the women’s prison care kits impacted Abramowitz the most.

He said, “Just seeing those little things [like feminine products] on the table really struck home because those are the things that can make a difference in somebody’s life that you may never see.”

Several youth groups from Mosaic Mennonite Conference congregations attended this year’s event. For Andrew Zetts, associate pastor at Salford Mennonite Church, in Harleysville, Pennsylvania, this was his second year in a row attending with youth from his congregation.

“As a suburban congregation it’s really easy for us to lose sight of those in need,” Zetts said. “[We’re] trying to pierce that bubble for a lot of our youth who have only



Volunteers from Circle of Hope Church (Brethren in Christ) hand items to participants who move through the assembly line. Photo/Kris J. Eden.

restoration. MCC also provides care for those in prison and those returning to society by providing kits with basic clothing and hy-

grown up in a certain context, to try to get them to see a bigger picture of the world and also to see the church in action.”

For Esther Hong, an MCC International Volunteer Exchange Program (IVEP) participant from Cambodia, a sense of community and belonging was a valuable part of the event. She attends Plains Mennonite Church, Lansdale, Pennsylvania, with her host family.

She said, “I’ve always been interested in

doing [community building and peacebuilding] ministry, and so it’s amazing to be part of this event. Being part of this event felt like home—coming together and doing something with your community.”

Jay Bergen, pastor of Germantown Mennonite Church, highlighted the importance of the community gathering for the event.

“Scripture commands us to remember those who are incarcerated as if we are chained to them (Hebrews 13:3). It’s too easy for those

of us who have not been incarcerated, or not had family members who are incarcerated, to feel like the justice system is something ‘out there.’ In reality, it fundamentally shapes our society. We are called to be followers of the Prince of Peace and act for peace in situations of violence.”

Laura Pauls-Thomas is communications director MCC East Coast.

Are We a Matthew 25 Church?

By Jonah Langenderfer

THERE ARE MANY hungry people in our world who should not be, and so many in power are to blame. What is the church to do? How can we successfully advocate for policy change so the government will do what needs to be done to feed the hungry? To get to the center of the right response for an overwhelming issue, the church needs to hear afresh and embody in our life together Jesus’s message in his story of the coming judgment on the sheep and the goats:

One day the King will return to judge the nations; and he will separate them as sheep and goats. The King’s judgment on the sheep will be: “Come, you who are blessed. For I was hungry, and you gave me food.” But the sheep will ask: “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you?” The King will reply: “When you fed one of the least of these siblings of mine, the truth is: you were feeding me.” The King’s judgment on the goats will be: “Depart from me, you who are cursed. For I was hungry, and you gave me nothing.” The goats will ask, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and not feed you?” The King will reply: “When you did not feed one of the least of these siblings of mine, the truth is: you did not feed me.” Then the goats will go away to eternal punishment, but the sheep to eternal life” [author’s abbreviated paraphrase].

So what is Jesus’s message? I believe that Jesus is not talking to nations but to individual people, based on their unconscious treatment of him through their conscious

treatment of the “least of these,” who are either Jesus’s poor missionaries or maybe poor disciples, but not any poor person in general. The Gospel has created a community so reconciled to God and one another that members of God’s family who have food will do whatever it takes to feed others (and mysteriously, Christ) who are hungry.

This interpretation appears to be less relevant to discussion on needed policy changes on behalf of poor people, and there are examples of wrong-headed use of this passage to justify ignoring the poor outside the church. Not only do I think that this is the best interpretation of a debated passage, I think carefully listening to the Word here invites the Church to look inward first; in other words, before we reflect on the “speck of sawdust” of needed systemic changes in society, let’s take a look inward first to the “plank” in the eye of the Brethren in Christ Church filled with “rich Christians in an age of hunger” (to use Ronald J. Sider’s famous book title). Are we a missionary people of Jesus, like one of the first missionaries who for the sake of the gospel endured hostility from the world’s powers and had often “known hunger and thirst . . . and been cold and naked” (2 Cor. 11:27)? This is the “policy” given to us by Christ in this story.

So often our churches on the “right” of the political spectrum ignore the poor or those on the “left” try to enact some type of government policy to create social change, without first being the church that receives Christ’s work in us to radically embody this

social change as a witness to an alternative Kingdom that challenges both the world and the church. Anabaptist theologian Stanley Hauerwas similarly critiques this when he describes Peter Maurin, the founder of The Catholic Worker, who did not believe that the works of mercy in this passage “were a strategy to care for the poor until another and better more effective social policy could be found. . . . Works of mercy were the social policy that Jesus had given his people for the renewal of the world.” Hauerwas also notes, “Dorothy Day calls this understanding of the works of mercy a scandal because it challenges the assumption that Christians are to do something for the poor by trying to create alternatives to capitalism or socialism. The problem with [this] is that we seduce ourselves into believing that we are working to feed the hungry . . . without knowing anyone who is hungry. . . .”¹

There is a remarkable example in Brethren in Christ history of when we did appear to respond to Christ’s message by becoming a hungry people ourselves in order to feed our hungry global siblings: we established the World Hunger Fund in 1974 as a multi-year fast to reduce household food and expenses and share the excess with our global brothers and sisters. After we respond this way and embody a Matthew 25 alternative community, this is not only faithful to Jesus, but may also raise the credibility of our corporate and individual advocacy for policy change for people who are hungry.²

Where today are “apostles” among the

Brethren in Christ embodying Christ's message to the point of being hungry, unwelcomed, unclothed, sick, or imprisoned? Matthew 25 invites us not to overlook radical stories happening in our own backyard.

Here's a story a bit different from our historic white Anabaptist church's political witness. For over a decade, one of the pastors in the Great Lakes Conference has been representing Christ in an overlooked story of "good trouble." Tracie Hunter, pastor of Western Hills Brethren in Christ Church in Cincinnati, was elected as the first female black juvenile court judge in Hamilton County, Ohio. She sought and accomplished justice in her community where systemic racism contributed to imprisoning and mistreating countless black youth. She was then pushed out by those in power and unjustly jailed; she was "visited in prison" and "given a cup of cold water" by our former bishop,

John Zuck, and our current bishop, Lynn Thrush, who has joined her in fighting for her justice and integrity ever since.³ Recently, after a ruling enabling Pastor Tracie to restore her law license, the "nations" asked for a statement. From a Matthew 25 Kingdom lens, this press conference was a fascinating reversal of judgment—rather than Tracie being on trial, she put the nations on trial and was defended and supported by her bishop and fellow pastors.

Perhaps this is a foreshadowing of the judgment on "nations" because they bullied the King's little sister Tracie. Jesus's story offers good news of promised vindication for people like Tracie, but also a warning of the judgment to come and a call to look inward. Are we nervous for this coming judgment: "when you did not feed one of the least of these siblings of mine, the truth is, you did not feed me."

Notes:

¹Stanley Hauerwas, commenting on Dorothy Day's essay "The Scandal of the Works of Mercy," in *Matthew: Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Ada, MI: Brazos Press, 2015).

²The Brethren in Christ World Hunger Fund continues in a different form. It is now known as the Global Compassion Fund, operates a bit differently, but still shares with our global brothers in sisters who are in dire circumstances. See <https://partnership.bicus.org/project/global-compassion-fund/>.

³To read more and support Pastor Tracie Hunter, see <https://traciehunterlegaldefensefunds.com>. See also the video of Bishop Lynn Thrush's introduction and Pastor Tracie's statement to the press at <https://www.facebook.com/1600062586/videos/3130998780528707/>.

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To Have a Home

By Jean Keller Thau

JESUS TELLS US that the poor will always be with us. Does that provide us with an excuse to look the other way? It is clear from Matthew 25:31-46 that this is not the case. We have somehow developed blinders that allow us to avoid the realities of our world that make us uncomfortable. One of those realities is homelessness.

On her way to work, Karen Olson passed a woman who was homeless. She stopped and bought her a sandwich. Through that single act of kindness, a relationship began that removed her blinders. Karen began to explore how she could reach out with more than just a sandwich. So began Family Promise in 1986 with the opening of its first affiliate, going national in 1988. From that one sandwich, Family Promise currently has over two hundred affiliates across the country because of one woman's desire to provide a "hand-up" not a "hand-out" to people experiencing homelessness.

On a national level, Family Promise advocates for governmental legislation that has the potential to effectively address homelessness. Four of those pieces of legislation include:

1. The Emergency Family Stabilization Act that would create new emergency funding streams that would be administered by the Administration for Children and Families within the US Department of Health and Human Services. This would provide flexible funding for community-based organizations to meet the unique needs of children, youth, and families experiencing homelessness in the wake of the coronavirus.

2. The Homeless Children and Youth Act (HCYA) advocates for the passage of and for modifications to the way the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines homelessness.

3. The Eviction Crisis Act (S. 3030) would establish a federal emergency housing assistance grant program that would provide aid to people experiencing housing insecurity in order to avert homelessness, according to the National Alliance to End Homelessness.

4. The Family Stability and Opportunity Vouchers Act is, according to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, a bill that would create an additional 500,000 housing vouchers specifically designed for low-income families with young children in order

to expand their access to neighborhoods of opportunity with high-performing schools, strong job prospects, and other resources.

Family Promise Harrisburg Capital Region (FPHCR), serving the Central Pennsylvania area, became one of the affiliates of Family Promise National in July 2010. My home church, Dillsburg Brethren in Christ, became one of FPHCR's first hosting sites. FPHCR serves homeless families with children through an Interfaith Hospitality Network (IHN). The IHN partners with local communities of faith, businesses, community leaders and volunteers. These partnerships provide resources that allow families to move from "homelessness to home." Currently, they provide additional resources through Heads Up, providing mental health support; Wheels Up, providing help with transportation; Move Up, providing rental assistance; and the Road to Success, a partnership with United Way providing job counseling and support for individuals. These programs allow FPHCR to embrace Jesus's call in Matthew; "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger

and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me. . . .”

Most importantly, FPHCR values the family. Their desire is to provide a safe place where a family can address the challenges of homelessness and move back into permanent housing while keeping their family intact. This can only be accomplished through numbers of individuals and organizations removing their blinders. A handful of people cannot do this alone. It takes a community of individuals and organizations who understand the need to walk together, providing the necessary resources to these families while allowing them to maintain their dignity.

The task can seem overwhelming. We only see the surface when we consider homelessness to be folks who are sleeping in tents, on sidewalks, on park benches, in cars. In reality, there are numbers of individuals and families who are staying in rundown, cheap, often roach-infested hotels because they can't

afford a security deposit and first month's rent, have bad credit, or are moving from one friend/family member's home to another. Their children have no permanent address and have difficulty achieving in school. We have developed the misconception that these folks just need to get a job but, in many cases, they have a job that doesn't provide enough income to survive in our competitive society and no opportunity to get the training they need to move into a job with potential advancement. These are the underserved and unseen people all around us who have no home.

Family Promise provides an opportunity for individuals and organizations to connect together in partnership in order to begin to address these issues. We can only begin to put a dent in the homeless crisis in our country when we are willing to reach out to the person in front of us. FPHCR provides an opportunity for us to do just that. In order to continue the work, we must be willing to take off our blinders and step forward with a

willingness to serve one another. I have received no greater blessing than the one of watching a family walking a difficult and challenging journey of homelessness hold up the keys to their new home—a place for a new beginning. I would not have had that opportunity if my home church had not stepped forward to serve as a host site for FPHCR, and I had not been given the opportunity to volunteer and serve.

You can find additional information regarding Family Promise National at www.familypromise.org and Family Promise Harrisburg Capital Region at www.familypromisehcr.org.

Jean Keller Thau serves on the board of Family Promise of Harrisburg Capital Region. She attends the Dillsburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church, where she previously served as associate pastor.

When You Saw Me Naked

By Zach Spidel

THE WEATHER WAS about as nasty that day as we ever get here in Dayton, Ohio. It was winter and right about freezing temperature. Thirty-two degrees isn't so bad if it's dry and you've got a layer or two of clothing on, but that day wasn't dry and the woman who came stumbling across the church yard just then was not wearing any layers.

It was a Friday, the day our church, with several partner organizations, provides various sorts of help to our neighbors. The church operates a pantry out of our garage and a clothing closet out of our basement. A partner organization prepares and serves so many hot meals here that they have to use our kitchen along with a mobile unit they bring in to cook it all. A friend from the neighborhood gives away toiletries from the back of her truck in the parking lot, while a local addiction ministry sometimes sets up a tent where they distribute Narcan, counsel, prayer, and connections to recovery options.

Sleet was falling steadily from the sky and the slushy stuff was soaking everything while

a stiff breeze made the damp that much more miserable. I was outside checking on something or other—I can't remember what. What I do remember is the sight of this woman as she came walking from Third St. across the church yard toward me. It took me a few moments to fully register what I was seeing. Our neighbor was wearing a t-shirt, and only a t-shirt. No pants, no sweater, no coat. She was holding herself as she walked, stooped over, her shoulders heaving. She started calling out half-way across the yard, a kind of moan, "Help me, I need help."

Her face was pocked with the sort of marks I recognize all too well now—wounds that open up in the flesh of certain drug users binging on bad stuff, who pick the sores open each time they begin to heal. She had slept in a tent just a block and a half away the night before, but all her clothing was soaked.

I only got those details from her later. What I and those with me that day did first was to get her in out of the cold. One of my Christian sisters standing there with me



practically cried out when she saw our neighbor coming, "Oh honey! Come here, come inside. We have to get you dry!" Our neighbor nodded violently, and let my sister lead her by the elbow into the church and down the steps to the basement. She took her straight to the women's bathroom, while I went and fetched another sister. "Can you grab some towels and bring them over to the women's room and then help get her some clothes and food?"

That's all I did, but the sisters went to work. Over the next hour or so, when I'd go through the basement on the kind of rounds I make on Fridays, I'd catch glimpses of our neighbor. I saw her next sitting with a cup of something hot, covered in blankets while various bits of clothing were held up for her,

“Would you like this one? What about this?”

A little while later I saw her dressed, her face washed, her eyes brighter and sharper, seated at a table next to one of the sisters. She wasn't talking, though; she was too busy eating the food set before her. Lastly, I saw her dressed in a long red frock-style winter coat. Her hair was pulled back, her shoulders relaxed; it was hard to believe this was the same woman from before. It was then that I got to talk to her a little bit, to hear about the tent and her boyfriend and the soaked clothes. We asked what more we might do. She didn't want treatment and wouldn't go to the shelter, so we did what we could. We grabbed sleeping bags and blankets and extra clothes and lots of extra food, and we drove her the block and half to the tent she was staying in with this new passel of goods.

Before we left, I asked if we could pray with her. She nodded and I prayed with a

hurting heart for God to help her. I prayed she would take his help, run from the drugs that had a hold on her and the people who only wanted to hurt her, and that she'd run toward God and those who helped her that day. I told her I really hoped to see her Sunday for breakfast at the church. She said she'd come, but she never did. In fact, I've never seen that woman again. I went looking for her a week later, but the tent was gone. I was saddened but not surprised; this is a painfully typical experience for us here.

Why do it then, some might wonder? We do not serve those who are desperately needy this way because we believe we have the power to fix their brokenness. We do not do it because we see ourselves as a social service agency. We do not do it because the measurable results are regularly encouraging. We do it because we love Jesus and this is how he comes to us—nearly naked and shivering in

the sleet, his face pocked with sores, his eyes filled with tears. We cannot turn our Lord away. We love and serve because he first loved and served us. We do not think in terms of efficacy or efficiency. We give, we pray, and we set our hope in God's promises. Chief among those that keep me going: nothing done for Jesus is ever done in vain. Wherever our neighbor is now, I pray she is well and that she remembers that day still as a sign of God's great love for her. I pray that the beautiful coat we gave her, which was no doubt ruined soon after, became more than a coat. I pray that it was the seed of a salvation that I will get to see when I greet that woman again, if not in this age, then in the age to come

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Being Jesus to the “Strangers” Among Us

By Julie Weatherford

THE IMMIGRATION CRISIS in the US has been long term and overwhelming, so it's hard to wrap one's head around the ever-shifting causes, issues, and problems or to sense that progress has been made to prevent further harm. Regardless, the people of my church, Madison Street Church, have tried to center our work around following the ways of Jesus, so care about the immigration crisis and for immigrants has naturally joined the list of other peace and justice efforts to which we've sensed God's call. Some of our efforts have been hands-on with local immigrants, some have focused on more distant efforts, and some have advocated for more just immigration policies. As I write about our efforts, I begin with the admission that, although they've been made with what we've hoped are Jesus-like love and compassion for migrants, they don't seem like much in light of the immensity of the problems, and they pale in comparison to what other churches have done.

Many are the theological underpinnings of our belief that, as an outgrowth of desire to follow Jesus, we should care about mi-

grants. The Old Testament is replete with God's instructions to his people to welcome and provide for needs of “strangers” migrating en route elsewhere or settled within their communities. God visited our planet as a human baby who spent his earliest years as a member of a poor migrant family that had to flee for safety to a foreign country. Older and back in Palestine, a member of an oppressed people in an occupied land under the dictatorship of a powerful empire, Jesus's lifestyle of reaching with love across dividing lines of his time, his example of connecting with vulnerable people, and his teachings about compassionately loving and serving all people make it clear that his followers are to do likewise. His familiar sheep-and-goats parable of Matthew 25 is just one way he underscored that God is pleased when nations and people respond to “the stranger” with welcome and compassionate aid.

Our church is in Riverside, a city of about 325 thousand in Southern California. A two-hour drive from the US-Mexico border, we enjoy a Hispanic population of 55 percent.* While many belong to families that

have lived in the area for decades, and a good number are descendants of indigenous people groups that have lived in California for centuries, some are new or relatively new arrivals who have endured dangers unimaginable to most of us: unlivable and dangerous situations in their home countries, long and dangerous travel by foot, dishonest “coyote” guides, imprisonment and family separations at the border, dangerous border towns, etc.

Riverside is also home to various other migrants/refugees, many from Afghanistan. There has been a small but steady flow for the last decade, followed by a large influx since August 2021 when US troops pulled out, the Taliban took control, and Afghans fled for the relative safety and freedom of the US. Most arrived with only the possessions they carried, deep grief over the loss of beloved family and country, PTSD from what they endured, and hope for a better life.

Here are some ways Madison Street Church has become involved in caring about immigrants and the immigration issue:

- For most of the last decade, we have partnered with the Human Migration Insti-

tute (formerly Globally Connected), a local non-profit organization that provides support to refugees, particularly Afghan refugees. Lasting bonds of friendship have resulted. Some of us Madison Street people have been involved with HMI's ESL (English as a Second Language) program, started in another local church's building and now meeting at Riverside's Islamic center. Some have provided transportation for Afghan women and children to ESL classes and accompanied them to medical appointments. Others have, either individually or in partnership with other churches, provided fresh produce for Afghan families in need. From time to time, HMI staff and local refugees have been the speakers in our Sunday morning gatherings. We've collected and distributed needed household items for newly arriving Afghan families and, this past fall, a couple of our women coached an Afghan woman through labor and delivery. One of the women opened her home for this needy mother and baby to stay for a couple months.

• Before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Madison Street's Radical Hospitality/Immigration Action group met on Sunday mornings, convinced that, as Jesus-followers, it was important for churches to

respond compassionately to the ongoing crisis at the US-Mexico border. The woman who facilitated the group (a member of the church) accessed and provided materials for us to become better educated about the issue and the current situation. A couple group members organized church-wide donations of items to go into refugee kits for recent migrants staying at a shelter in Arizona before moving on. Some of us joined with a local church's food distribution program primarily serving Hispanic individuals and families regardless of immigration status.

Our group connected with MCC US's National Peace and Justice Ministries (formerly MCC Washington Office). NPJM's goal is to educate Anabaptists and policy makers about peace and justice issues in order to encourage more welcoming communities and a more peaceful and just world. For years, our church had publicized and participated in NPJM's letter-writing campaigns to legislators and, in the fall of 2019, NPJM responded to our group's invitation for a staff person to visit to help us learn about and advocate for just immigration policies. NPJM's Tammy Alexander graciously connected with and educated our church on a Sunday morning about the immigration crisis at our

southern border. Giving the best slide presentation I've ever witnessed, Tammy also helped us prepare for a visit the next day to the local office of our US Congressman, and she accompanied a dozen of us as we advocated for specific legislation on behalf of more just immigration policies.

• Aware that almost no one wants to leave family, friends and home country to make a dangerous trek and transition to a new place, we've supported efforts to improve conditions in other countries so people are not forced to uproot and flee. With this in mind, we have long appreciated the work of Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). Via financial giving, fundraisers, kit drives, relief sales and board work, the people of Madison Street Church have joined in MCC's work to alleviate suffering and reduce the need to migrate, as well as to lend relief and support to refugees.

We've felt privileged to be able to partner with others to participate in these small ways in God's work of welcome, advocacy and care for immigrants.

Julie Weatherford is one of the founding members of the Madison Street Church (Brethren in Christ) in Riverside, CA.

Finding a Warm Embrace

By Adam Jones

IN THE SUMMER of 2003, while I was at Asbury Theological Seminary, I sensed the Lord calling me to mission work. So, to get more experience and discernment, I went to work at Wayside Homeless Shelter in Louisville. I served food and did chalk drawings with kids. One day as I left, the Holy Spirit spoke clear as day: Can you tell me the name of one person? I couldn't. I was serving the "least of these," but I didn't care to know them. Since becoming a pastor, God has brought this experience to mind many times.

Shane Claiborne says in his book *Irresistible Revolution*: "Almost every time we talk with affluent folks about God's will to end poverty, someone says, 'But didn't Jesus say, 'The poor will always be with you?'" Many of the people who whip out this verse

have grown quite insulated and distant from the poor and feel defensive. I usually gently ask, 'Where are the poor? Are the poor among us?'"

Those words rang true for me. The church I serve, Open Door, has worked to become a community where the least of these find a warm embrace. In doing so we have met folks like Judy. Here is part of her story:

In April of 2003, I lost my husband. My name is Judy and I am the Granny of Open Door. I love my home. I have been there seventeen years. There is always a seat on my porch swing for anyone that comes by. In addition to losing the man of my life, I was now responsible for all the bills on one income. This was a really

hard change. I make just over \$800/month, but my house payment is over \$500 per month. After food and utilities, I don't have much left for unexpected expenses. My house is winterized, but it is also over sixty years old. Sometimes I can't pay my utilities in the winter months."

How do we help Granny Judy when no amount of giving will reduce rising costs?

Open Door Church served in Ingleside Mobile Home Park. It was one of the poorest housing locations in our city. We had come to respect and love our neighbors there. Marie was a kind, gentle elder who lived with her son. Sarah worked hard while supporting her three daughters as a single mom. Mary was a strong, loving mother who lived in the

mobile home with her husband and six children. Several families had joined Open Door. Then one day, the owner decided to sell the land to an apartment developer. The 250 plus families had sixty days to vacate. The problem was they had been paying \$300 for rent and we couldn't find any comparable rents in the city. Many ended up like Judy, with ever rising rents and bills with flat or decreasing incomes. We felt powerless to help. We couldn't pay everyone's rent. The housing market was insufficient and unjust for the working poor.

Thankfully, our church was a member of BUILD (Building a United Interfaith Lexington with Direct action), a community organizing group that uses the power of organized, faithful people to change policy in our city. We, along with twenty-five other congregations, interviewed hundreds of our members and found that lack of affordable housing was a city-wide problem. In fact, through our research from 2008-2011, we discovered that one in four families could not afford their rent in Lexington. We also found through a market research study funded by the city that Lexington was losing four hundred units of affordable housing each year. A permanent renter underclass had

become a reality.

BUILD researched what other cities had done and found a tool that could increase the supply of affordable housing: an Affordable Housing Trust Fund.

For seven years, our churches gathered hundreds of people at our Nehemiah Action each spring. Granny Judy shared her story in front of our city mayor and over a thousand people and asked our mayor to put an Affordable Housing Trust fund of \$2 million into the city budget to address the housing crisis. For six years, the mayor told us no. Then, in 2015, I stood before Mayor Gray on the stage of Immanuel Baptist Church, and I asked the same question for a seventh year: Will you put an Affordable Housing Trust fund in the city budget in the amount of \$2 million?

He said yes.

The Affordable Housing Trust Fund has worked so well in Lexington that our council increased it to \$5 million this past year. Thousands of affordable units have been created.

For 20 years, these twenty-six congregations have worked through this same process of listening to our neighbors' needs and working for just action in our city. As a result,

today we have a drug rehabilitation program for women in jail, restorative justice in our courts, better bus routes, mental health court funding, and several other city programs that help our neighbors.

This work does not stem from some political agenda we have. This work grows from the people we love, like Granny Judy. We pursued mental health court because Sherri would have gone to jail over and over without a court that understood her illness. We are currently working to get public affordable microtransit in Lexington because Charlie has one lung, an oxygen tank, and cannot drive. He cannot wait three hours for his pickup because our current system is so broken. I think "the least of these" long for churches that want to know their names, and who listen to their stories and love them well. Matthew 25 reminds me that those living on the margins should find the church right there beside them, sharing in their struggle, calling them by name, and working toward the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

Adam Jones is pastor of Open Door Church (Brethren in Christ) in Lexington, KY.

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lament protest over an injustice and work to support social change to benefit those facing systemic issues. Understanding your local community will bring multiple ways that your congregation can help.

In these efforts we want to remember the relational aspects of helping and not neglect the mutuality of what we do. Helping as the community issues out of respect for people, for all are made in God's image and loved by him. It is his lead we follow in knowing who our neighbor is, in seeing the least of these, and inviting them to his inclusive banquet table. We are all in this together.

Lois Saylor is an editorial advisor for Shalom! and attends the Harrisburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church.

Woman Reaching

a poem by L. A. Saylor

*a woman reaching out
touching the hem of his garment
these fringes of faith
like Miriam packing her tambourine
and dancing shoes
for a desert trip
or Mary packing her heart
with untied thoughts
like Sarah touching old age with a promise
or Elizabeth
unpacking an old hope
and a woman at a well, thirsty
a foreign woman, accepting crumbs
or Rahab with only a scarlet hope
and Ruth grasping the hem of Naomi
taking faith for a walk
without a path*

Editor's Notes

2024 subscription renewals: The 2024 subscription renewal letters will be going out soon (or maybe already has). The cost is still \$20 per year, with additional contributions welcome. You can renew and contribute online at bicus.org/resources/publications/shalom/ or send a check payable to Brethren in Christ U.S, to the editor. Thank you!

Upcoming topics:

In anticipation of the 2024 General Assembly, the Spring edition will address the theme, "Formed to Follow." What does it mean to follow Jesus faithfully and with integrity? If you have ideas for topics or would like to write for *Shalom!*, contact the editor at bickhouse@aol.com.

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BOOK REVIEW: The Least of These

By Lois Saylor

UNDERSTANDING JESUS'S CALL to be mindful of and helpful to people in need is basic to any reading of scripture. James echoes this call in his letter to the church so profoundly that some think he is putting works over faith. James, however, is calling for our faith to be active, to follow the words of Jesus towards "the least of these." And Jesus's teachings follow the instruction and expectations of the law and prophets of our Jewish heritage. We see this in a collection of essays in the book, *The Least of These: Practicing a Faith Without Margins*. Editor Angie Ward organizes a thoughtful progression of chapters leading the reader into multiple reasons and ways to practice our faith without margins, without barriers, or restrictions.

Ten authors from different backgrounds write on various topics leading to a wide-ranging conversation while the cohesion of the theme remains intact and in the forefront of each chapter. Some chapters rely on stories that are moving and motivating. Other chapters take the reader through theology, history, and biblical foundations for social justice. Still others explore the virtue of proximity, multi-ability churches, and practical applications of scripture. I found some of the theology and historical chapters to be basic and well suited for those who have not yet

studied the topic. A study guide at the end of the book has questions to help stimulate discussion, making it helpful for youth groups or those beginning to explore this aspect of scriptural calling.

For those already acquainted with a "least of these" theology and lifestyle, the book offers some thought-provoking questions and suggestions. The first author talks about a man who needed help. One lesson she learned from him (among many others), concerned the barriers to helping, which included "our selfishness and entitlement . . . a frenetic pace of busyness." Another author saw that financial help was based on the recipient meeting "certain criteria" making them somehow "worthy of assistance." Readers can ask if they have these same barriers and further ask what hinders them from helping.

So how do we approach helping? One author challenges us to understand the "least of these" does not mean "less than." He admits he was guilty of this himself when a man showed up at church. He writes, "[I viewed] myself as the service provider and him as the service recipient." Instead, it turned out to be a valuable and mutual relationship lasting years. He writes:

Real compassion, however, is when we

enter into mutually beneficial opportunities with our neighbors through personal proximity, personal interactions, and personal relationships. . . . Whenever we find ourselves in one-way relationships in which there is not mutual benefit, then we likely aren't practicing compassion but rather a form of patronization that is meant to make us feel good about ourselves. This is not the Kingdom at all.

Another chapter focused on the community aspect of our calling to be involved neighbors. We are called to be a church body working together. If the role of reaching out is daunting or overwhelming as individuals, we don't have to do this alone. We can and should reach out together. "This is community," she writes. "This is a family thing."

She sees this happening in multiple ways. A congregation together can meet the individual needs of a refugee family, a single mom, an unhoused person, or a victim of sex trafficking. On a community level, a church could support a struggling neighborhood business or a local sport ministry for those unable to afford athletic association fees, and under-resourced schools always need help with supplies that we can provide. On a larger cultural level, churches can support a

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Shalom!

A JOURNAL FOR THE PRACTICE OF RECONCILIATION

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Do Justice, Love Mercy, Walk Humbly

JUST WHEN YOU think social media is a waste of time, something shows up in the middle of scrolling that you didn't ask for but turns out to be helpful. This time it was an ad for a new book called *Social Justice for the Sensitive Soul: How to Change the World in Quiet Ways*, by Dorcas Cheng-Tozun (Broadleaf Books, 2023). The title and description sound a lot like me: "Social justice work, we often assume, is raised voices and raised fists. It involves leading, advocating, and organizing whatever is required—in the streets, villages, inner cities, halls of political power, and more. But what does social justice work look like for those of us who aren't comfortable battling in the trenches?"

In the introduction, Cheng-Tozun says, "This book is for anyone interested in engaging with social justice who identifies as sensitive, empathic, quiet, introverted, or melancholic." As an introvert, and usually fairly quiet and (I hope) empathic, I recognize myself and often feel like my passion for social justice hasn't often translated itself into effective action partly because I'm uncomfortable with many of the traditional tools of social justice activism. But Cheng-Tozun has good news, and spends much of the book encouraging "sensitive souls" to embrace their own unique gifts and not try to be something they aren't. She describes various possibilities for effective and necessary action that is not always seen as social justice work. There are the connectors, creatives, record keepers, builders, equippers, and researchers who often work behind the scenes doing work that is absolutely neces-

sary but often not as visible and obvious.

You might be wondering: What does this book have to do with this edition of *Shalom!*? Obviously, there is a word in common: justice. Justice, social or otherwise, is central to the biblical message. In fact, it's mentioned in Deuteronomy and Micah—along with fearing God, serving God with all your heart and soul, keeping God's commandments and decrees, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God. God **requires** justice; it's not an option or something God wishes he could have but doesn't need.

For this edition, a number of pastors do what they do best: explain what Micah means when he says that God requires us to "do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God" (6:8). Other writers put the verse in the context of daily life with stories of how they are participating in bringing about justice and mercy in people's lives.

In Cheng-Tozun's list of the types of "sensitive souls" who work behind the scenes, I see myself in the "equipper" category. She says, "When sensitive people pass along invaluable knowledge, best practices, research, strategies, ideas, and more, we support others in contributing to the causes we dearly love. By doing so, we give them a better chance of creating change, of nudging all of us toward better, fairer societies." That's some of what I hope happens through *Shalom!*—that you will be better equipped and motivated to "do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God."

Harriet S. Bicksler, editor

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Jonah and the Justice of God

By David Flowers

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:8 NIV).

THIS FAMILIAR VERSE is from the LORD to the people of Israel through his prophet Micah, a contemporary with the prophet Jonah when the Neo-Assyrian Empire was on their doorstep. We know from the Scriptures that Assyria's advance was prophesied as a judgment of God because of the injustice of his own people. This is the context of Micah's word from God.

The Neo-Assyrian Empire is considered by historians to be the first real empire the world has ever seen. They were masters of ge-

ographical and political administration. They were the first to have a standing army of several hundred thousand men. They were known for being merciless conquerors. When they defeated a tribe or nation, they would take a portion of their people back to their cities as slaves by hooking them in the nose, lips, and jaws—leading them back like dogs on a leash. The Assyrians were also the first to use a form of crucifixion against their enemies.

In 701 BCE, when they invaded the southern kingdom of Judah, they flayed the Jews there—an event famously depicted on what is known as the Lachish Reliefs, which can be seen today in the British Museum. It was the worst kind of brutality. Of course, like all evil empires, there were regular folks who sought to make a living, provide for their families, create beauty, art, and culture. For example, Nineveh was known for having elaborate parks, gardens, and zoos that housed animals from every corner of the ancient Near East. But that didn't interest Israel. It certainly wasn't the reason Jonah was called by God to go to Nineveh.

These kinds of details don't appear in the book of Jonah and aren't typically shared in a children's Sunday School class. When you know these things and read the whole book of Jonah 4, it's quite clear that it is much more than a children's story. In fact, I believe that this ancient comedy is often oversimplified and misrepresented—from Sunday School teachers to Veggie Tales. As a result, many in the church today have missed its rather sophisticated style and message, which in its original Hebrew uses humor and satire to communicate theological truths and provoke radical obedience from its readers. More specifically, the book challenges our human understanding of justice.

The author does this by telling the story of a reluctant and rebellious prophet who turns out (rather ironically and comically) to be the most successful evangelist in the Old Testament! It's a story about God's mission to save the lost, specifically our enemies. Yes, he loves his people. But he also loves those

who don't know him, particularly those who have given themselves over to violence, corruption, and dehumanizing beliefs and practices. Through this challenging book, the author invites us to look in the mirror and then answer the call to live according to the justice of God and embody his mercy and compassion in the world.

Jonah lived in the eighth century BCE in the time of the divided kingdoms. He was a prophet in the northern kingdom of Israel at the same time as Amos, as well as Isaiah, Hosea, and Micah in the southern kingdom of Judah. The only other reference to Jonah in the Old Testament is in 2 Kings 14:23-25, and it's not good. The Bible tells us that Jonah speaks favorably of Israel's wicked king Jeroboam II, while his contemporary Amos proclaims judgment.

The book of Jonah begins with this shady prophet being called by God to go speak a word of coming judgment to his enemies in Nineveh, the capital city of the Neo-Assyrian empire, but he instead runs from God. He buys a ticket on a merchant ship full of pagan sailors who were headed for Tarshish—2,500 miles in the opposite direction! Jonah thinks he's outwitted God and feels so good about himself he falls asleep in the hull of the ship.

But then a violent storm comes. These skilled sailors have never seen anything like it. They believe they're all going to die. All they can do is toss over their supplies and cry out to their gods for help. That doesn't appease any of the gods they know. They discover Jonah asleep and unaware of the nightmare they are all living. Jonah finally admits that Yahweh—"the God of the land and the sea"—is upset with him.

Rather than "act justly" by repenting and going to his enemies in Nineveh, Jonah prefers death. So he tells the poor, frightened sailors to throw him overboard. In awe of Jonah's God, they do so reluctantly; the storm stops, and the pagan sailors repent and worship the LORD. The pagans learn about the mercy of God, and Jonah learns that you can run but you can't hide.

In chapter 2, Jonah sinks down into the



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darkness of the sea. Instead of encountering the feared mythological sea monster, Jonah is swallowed by a big fish that is sent by God to serve as a holding place for Jonah. It's there that Jonah prays. Will the belly of the beast be the end of Jonah or a new beginning and rebirth? As pious as his prayer may have sounded, it was missing any signs of confession and repentance. Yet God is merciful and gives Jonah another chance to obey his prophetic calling. After three days in the belly of the beast, God commands the fish to spit Jonah out on dry land. This time Jonah will arise and go to Nineveh.

In chapter 3, Jonah only gets one day into Nineveh (a city that took three days to walk through) before he stops and proclaims a message that we have reason to believe wasn't the one God gave him. All Jonah shouts is: "forty more days and Nineveh will be 'hapak' [literally overthrown or turned over]." In other words, "Prepare to die, you sorry suckers!" To Jonah's surprise, the mercy of God went before him, and his one-sentence sermon sparked a revival. The Ninevites repent, and word quickly reaches the king, who also repents. With not much to go on, the pagan king commands everyone in the city, including all the animals, to adopt a humble posture of repentance—to turn from their evil and violence. Maybe, just maybe, the king of Nineveh said, God will spare them all. Clearly, these unbelievers knew they were guilty, even without Jonah telling them.

Then God changed his mind and didn't do as he intended, or as Jonah wanted. In an ironic and humorous way, Jonah's prophecy that Nineveh would be "hapak" (which can

also mean changed or transformed in Hebrew) had come true. The people of Nineveh did indeed change. Their city was most certainly "turned over" by the work of the Spirit of God.

Jonah was livid! We learn that this is why he didn't want to go to Nineveh in the first place. He knew that God might forgive his enemies. Jonah knew that God's justice, mercy, and compassion was unlike his own. He didn't like it. He wanted God, like many of us today, to think and feel the way he does about justice.

Of course, the reader might be left wondering, "I get that God is merciful and compassionate, but where is the justice in this story? And how do I apply this to my life?"

In his commentary on Jonah, Phillip Carey writes:

We must be clear where Jonah gets it wrong. It's not as if we should never desire justice or even celebrate the wrath of God. . . . It is good news when the oppressor is toppled, the terrorist is caught, and the torturer enjoys no impunity. The arrival of justice is heartening for the afflicted. . . . [T]he great danger is that instead of rejoicing at the vindication of the afflicted, we self-righteously identify ourselves as the afflicted and the victimized, taking pity on ourselves and not on others, so that in our imagination the LORD becomes a weapon in our campaign to destroy our enemies, an instrument for our own vengefulness rather than the judge of the whole earth" (Phillip Carey, *Brazos Theological Commentary*, 134).

Carey goes on, "[God's] aim is always to overturn the evil that destroys his creation, and he can accomplish this justly by destroying the evildoer, but yet more justly and gloriously by turning the evil heart into something new." So, God "changes his mind" as Jonah 3:10 says, to "overcome evil with good," echoing Paul in Rom. 12:21, and as Carey says, "defeating evil in the abundance of his mercy—doing more, not less justice" (134).

Is this not the power and justice of God as seen through the cross of Christ? It's only in the cross that we see both the justice and grace of God perfectly. Tim Keller once said, "the world says I can be just or I can be loving, but I can't be or do both." But the Lord, in his wisdom displayed on Calvary, says otherwise. Of course, if we're going to live according to God's justice, as Micah says, "we must love mercy and walk humbly with God" as we patiently trust him in our suffering and wait for God to set the world to rights in his own good time (Exodus 34:6-7).

Finally, let's not miss the main point of the book of Jonah: to expose as shameful something that we all do but don't want to admit that we do, both with God and with others. To put the question to us: "Will we be like God in our mercy, grace, and compassion, or not? Will we live according to his justice, or not?" The God who looks like Jesus invites us to follow him.

David Flowers is the senior pastor at the Grantham (PA) Brethren in Christ Church. Earlier this year, David preached a four-part series on the book of Jonah: granthamchurch.org/sermons.

What Does It Mean to Be a Micah 6:8 Church?

By Jonah Langenderfer

CAN YOU IMAGINE being the church who receives this message of indictment from a fiery prophet: "When we think of the terrible outrages that have been perpetuated upon the colored race by the white man, it staggers our imagination to even think of the great and sweeping condemnation that a God of justice will have to pass upon the white race on the great day of final reckoning." I want to suggest that how the Brethren

in Christ Church might have felt hearing these fiery words from editor V. L. Stump in a 1938 article in the *Evangelical Visitor* wouldn't be that different from how the people of God felt right before hearing the famous words in Micah 6:8 from the prophet Micah. Let's reflect together as the Brethren in Christ Church to address two questions. **First, what does Micah 6:8 mean in context?**

Micah 6:8 is a beautiful verse that is quoted often, but it's even more profound when read in context. It comes to us from an intense passage. Imagine your church has been called to the courtroom with God. Micah, the court prosecutor delivers God's charge to your church: "My people have not done right by me!" (6:1-2), and God laments, "Have I not done right by you?" (vv. 3-5). You respond: "What sacrifice can we offer to do

right by you?” (vv. 6-7). Israel’s answer misses the point and is a “superficial answer seeking to avoid true conversion,” like a husband saying sorry to his wife after an affair with a “sacrifice” of flowers and chocolate, but refusing to take any steps to stop the affair and truly reconcile.

Micah responds for God: “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” Micah tells the people what they should have said, the answer they’ve already heard multiple times from God through other prophets. What should they have humbly said to their gracious God? “Thank you for loving us and saving us! We are yours and will walk with you alone as our God! We will gratefully love you and one another all our days!” The superficial sacrifice of religion (flowers and chocolate) isn’t the fruit of a true faith that heals a wounded relationship with God. God is saying, “Instead of a people of idolatry and injustice, be my people who act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly before their God!”

Second, what does it look like to be a Micah 6:8 church?

It is important to see that Micah’s call is not primarily given to the individual Christian to go do his or her part to change the world by acting justly and loving mercy. When atheists doubt God’s existence and ask Christians, “Where is all the mercy, justice, humble godliness in the world?” God says to

us: your mission is to be my people! Put another way, “For the change you want to see in this world, you be the change!” Through the grace of Jesus and the power of the Spirit, be God’s transformed people of justice, mercy and humility before God! Our first task is to be the church, not to make the unjust world the church.

So what does loving mercy look like? The early church in Acts were people of radical mercy. If one of the believers had need, that person was treated like family. When my wife had hip surgery this year and if I hadn’t had insurance, I would have sold property or done whatever it took to cover the surgery. The early church was such a *koinonia* community (Acts 2:42) of radical family love and mercy for one another that they shared their resources and even sold land so that poverty was eliminated among them.

When the world sees this countercultural community of mercy and even experiences its overflow, the world is both attracted and scandalized. The Roman emperor Julian was an enemy of Christianity, but he admitted that believers’ generosity to the poor made it highly attractive: “Why do we not observe that it is [Christians’] benevolence to strangers . . . and the pretended holiness of their lives that have done most to increase [Christianity]. . . For it is disgraceful that, when no Jew ever has to beg, and the impious Galileans support not only their own poor but ours as well, all men see that our people lack aid from us.”

What does acting justly look like? The early church not only mercifully shared their resources with the needy among them through ministries like a food pantry or benevolence offering. They also acted justly when marginalized widows from a minority culture among them were being unjustly denied or “overlooked.” Mercy to these minority widows would have been insufficient. Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously said, “We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself.” The early church did an organized effort of justice by delegating seven leaders from the minority group being overlooked (Acts 6:5) and authorizing them to be responsible to correct the injustice (Acts 6:3) that was threatening the unity of the church. Once they did this, the witness of the united church being a people of justice contributed to the spread of the word of God (Acts 6:7).

When a prophet among us today brings God’s indictment before the church, what would it look like to be a church that humbly listens and seeks to repent and again “walk humbly before God”? May God help us be a Micah 6:8 church.

Jonah Langenderfer is pastor of the Pleasant Hill (OH) Brethren in Christ Church. This article is adapted from a sermon he preached at Pleasant Hill.

Justice, Mercy, and Foster Care

by Drew Strayer

LOVE MERCY, ACT justly, and walk humbly with your God. Those are the things we are expected to do if we are people of God. Rejected are the offerings for sin, guilt, friendship, and tithe. Instead, the list includes ways of being that benefit individuals and those around them. Mercy, justice, humility—gifts for our own wellbeing and to others as worship to God.

As people who understand Scripture through the lens of Jesus Christ, what are his calls to his followers in the New Testament? Among others, we find blessings for the poor

in spirit, mourners, meek, hunger for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, righteous martyrs, salt and light of the earth, and many others. In Christ’s commands and blessings, we hear echoes of Micah’s prophetic call for mercy, justice, and humility.

As one who misses the goal but strives toward it, I offer this brief reflection. My wife, Millyellen, and I and our biological daughter (and son when home from college) have been serving as a foster family for the past year. Last summer, we cared for a newborn in

the hospital and then in our home before she transitioned to a safe extended family member. In the last week, we concluded eight months of care for a sibling group who transitioned to extended family. From this limited but rich experience I offer some thoughts.

First, mercy, justice, and humility are calls from God to Christ followers but are not expected of the world. Human capitalist systems are not designed to reward those characteristics—quite the opposite. We are to be in the world as servants of God’s King-

dom, not of the world or its kingdoms. Second, God calls us to love sacrificially and remember that God “puts the lonely in families”(Ps .68:6) when we feel we have nothing left. Finally, we may not see the reward for faithfulness or the fruit of our care in this lifetime.

God does not give us more than we can handle when we walk in God’s strength and grace and love. God absolutely gives us more than we can handle on our own. When we come to the ends of ourselves, we see God’s perfecting power and strength made manifest in our weakness. What a precious gift when we have nothing left and feel like we’re about to crumble and God provides what we lack and the Kingdom of God impacts the moment!

If mercy, justice, and humility were characteristics the world valued, human systems would make it easier and of worldly reward to faithfully follow God’s calls. Foster care can be joyful sacrifice as children are loved and wrapped in grace and thrive while they grow. But the foster care system can be slow to act in defense of the vulnerable, rich in grace for those who’ve demonstrated themselves poor stewards of trust, and demanding and harsh to those extending themselves in care and sacrifice to vulnerable children.

We’ve seen in recent years a refocus from “What is best for the kids?” to “How can we reunite birth families?” The working assumption is that birth families are better, and

so birth parents’ rights are protected by the courts. is Unless birth parents have completely refused every single element of the reunification process, the goal is to return children to their care, regardless of accountability to healthy child-rearing.

If we expected the world to function according to God’s call to justice and mercy, we would jump and shout and scream, “dangerous,” “illogical,” “unrighteous” or more. Trust me, if shouting (or jumping for that matter) made any difference, I would have no voice left and my legs would have collapsed. The reality is that the state and courts are run by humans, and there are absolutely principalities and powers in this world that seek to structure systems that do not lead to human flourishing, but rather the promulgation of pain and grief.

As a follower of Christ I must ask, what can I do to walk in Christ’s ways and “proclaim good news to the poor, proclaim freedom for prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, and set the oppressed free, and proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. (Luke 4:18-19)?” I believe I need to be willing to speak truth to power even when I have no words left, to keep loving when it hurts, to keep giving when I’m ready to give up, and to keep serving when I’m out of strength. In those places of my emptiness, Christ can shine.

In those moments when we’ve loved, cared, and helped these precious ones heal, and then the system demands they visit the

ones who harmed them and traumatized them, we cannot refuse the civil authority, but we can speak truth to power so that the system is notified of the harmful impacts. We can and must be ready when they get back from that visit to love, care, and help them heal again. The feelings of powerlessness and the desire for justice and retributive judgment can be infinitely strong at times when night terrors awaken these little ones God calls us to care for. But we are called to love enemies. King David called down God’s justice on the wicked and God knows I’ve done the same, but I’ve also called down God’s mercy and I know God the omnipotent can redeem anyone and heal any pain.

Every day, broken and human Christ-led foster parents and families wade into water over their heads to hold up little ones and care for and love them. They know justice is a fruit they will never see yet hope that healing and wholeness at some level will be fruit they *can* see, always trusting that God will hold them up as they seek to love mercy, act justly, and walk humbly with God.

Drew and Millyellen Strayer are planting a neighborhood expression of Christ’s love in Salem, OR. They have raised two biological children and fostered three children. They eagerly seek to love others well, and while they seek justice for the vulnerable, they readily acknowledge their reliance on God’s grace and the forgiveness of others for their own failures to love well.

Mercy as the Means of Justice

By Zach Spidel

MOST PEOPLE I know tend to assume, most of the time, that mercy and justice stand in some sort of tension with one another. Perhaps it is the tension that holds taut between two opposites pulling in different directions, or perhaps it is a creative tension between two noble goods that are, nevertheless, not entirely compatible with one another. In any event, it has been my experience that mercy is usually thought of as abrogating or, at least, lessening the demands of justice.

Justice demands—in this account—that

each one gets what they deserve, be it reward or punishment. Mercy, however, withholds from meting out punishments justly deserved. Mercy declares an amnesty and forgoes the punishment or penalty which justice would demand. This is a typical account of the two virtues in question. In the contemporary West, we default to it without thinking much about it. But I am convinced that this account of their relationship misses the most profound insights of Scripture on what each entails and how they relate.

For this brief article, I wish to take you to



a single passage from the prophet Isaiah that lays bare a different relationship between the two and, thereby, bears witness to a different conception of each. Read Isaiah 30. The chapter opens with a classic cataloguing of prophetic woes: “Woe to the rebellious children, says the LORD, who carry out a plan, but not mine. . .” (v. 1). God catalogues the

rebellion of his children in excruciating detail and with wild, terrible imagery. They've been told to seek security in him alone, but instead they make forbidden alliances with the earthly empire of Egypt, thinking that one unjust power can save them from another (the Assyrians threatening destruction).

Even worse, the people implore the prophets "not to see" and beg for lies to live by—they even ask for the prophets to speak no more of the Holy One of Israel! (v. 10-11). They reject God's word and trust in oppression and deceit, and because they give themselves over to those forces, God tells them this sin will "become for you like a break in a high wall, bulging out and about to collapse, whose crash comes suddenly, in an instant. . ." (v. 13). Even with the weight of their sin bulging like a break in the wall, even at this late hour, however, God calls to them. He shows them a way out and tells them, "In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength" (v. 15). But the people flatly reject God's warning: "But you refused and said, 'No! We will flee upon horses'—therefore you shall flee!—and, 'We will ride upon swift steeds'—therefore your pursuers shall be swift! A thousand shall flee at the threat of one; at the threat of five you shall flee until you are left like a flagstaff on the top of a mountain, like a signal on a hill" (v. 16-17).

God tried to show them a way out; they have had every opportunity to repent. Instead, they openly and repeatedly and know-

ingly chose evil over good, oppression and deceit over the God of justice. Keep that in mind as you read the very next, astonishing, verse of this chapter:

Therefore, the LORD waits to be gracious to you; therefore, he will rise up to show mercy to you. For the LORD is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him (v. 18).

The conjunctive words here hold wonders. The first two "therefores" refer to the people's persistent, knowing, unrepentant choosing of evil. In view of that, because of that, God waits. He waits until they will take grace from him. The people will reap the whirlwind of their own sowing until, at last, God gets to do what he wants to do and give them grace and mercy. Those therefores are wonderful! But even more amazing is the "for" that begins the second sentence of this verse. Why does God respond to human injustice with patient waiting, with a determination to wait out the evil intentions of rebellious children until they will let him show them mercy? He patiently endures their evil and waits to show them mercy BECAUSE "the LORD is a God of justice."

He waits to show mercy not in abrogation of his justice or even as something in tension with it. His mercy arises from and is a means toward satisfying his justice. But how can that be if mercy relents on demanding what justice insists on? I suggest that this passage shows us that such a conception of these two virtues falls short of their biblical depiction.

I briefly suggest an alternative approach that better accords with this Scripture's profound insights. Justice might be thought of as that which establishes or re-establishes God's shalom—his peace. God's peace is not the mere absence of conflict, but the healthy inhabitation of that web of relationships for which God has designed us. Shalom is when all things and all people stand in right, life-affirming relationship with their Creator and with one another. Justice aims at establishing or reestablishing shalom. As it turns out, what most often can re-establish shalom in cases where evil is done is not vengeance or punishment, but forgiveness, reconciliation, and, yes, mercy.

So, because God is just, he waits to be merciful, knowing that it is mercy that will heal our wayward hearts and bring us to the point of repentance and a willingness to make restitution. It was, after all, the merciful reception by Jesus that caused a callous tax collector to abandon his lies and return his ill-gotten gains four times over. It was the mercy of Jesus that brought Paul to his knees and turned him around to serve the church he had formerly persecuted. The biblical examples could be multiplied for some time. You may fill in many examples yourself and, in fact, I commend that exercise to you as being good for the soul!

Zach Spidel is pastor of East Dayton Fellowship, Dayton, OH.

Practicing Justice and Mercy for Forty Years

By Marian Musser

IN SOUTH CENTRAL Pennsylvania, there is a Christian social services agency whose mission is to show the love and hope of Christ by serving neighbors in need. Founded by three Brethren in Christ congregations in 1982, New Hope Ministries (New Hope) is now supported by 280 congregations.

Scriptures like Micah 6.8 and others addressing peace, justice, and acts of mercy were motivational to the task force that worked to found the ministry, along with Jesus's parable

in Matthew 25 about the sheep and the goats. Jesus's brother James also stresses the importance of putting faith into action in responding to the physical needs of those without clothes and daily food (James 2:14-17), and the apostle John instructs those who claim to have the love of God to help those in need (1 John 3:16-18).

At a time of rising unemployment in northern York County in 1982, especially with layoffs at Caterpillar and Harley Davidson, families who had never sought assistance

found themselves facing financial crisis. At that same time the federal government announced major cuts to domestic programs which meant the only social services center in the area would be closed. The question facing the task force was whether and how to respond that would make a difference. Though none on the task force had experience in social services, they engaged in some leg work to discern the scope of the problem and began to envision a faith-based center supported by local churches, businesses, and

individuals that would offer comprehensive services where Jesus's love would be demonstrated.

Could something like New Hope Ministries do this? From its modest beginning forty years ago at the Dillsburg Brethren in Christ Church—with a part-time director, limited funds, and numerous dedicated and committed volunteers—New Hope has grown from helping several dozen people each month to serving more than six thousand people each month from nine centers, sixteen more locations served by its Mobile Pantry, and fifteen stability and workforce programs. The stability and workforce programs range from basic money management and GED classes to nurse aid and forklift training. Putting stability and workforce programs in place, and more recently hiring a housing and homeless coordinator, grew out of an understanding that training, empowerment, and capacity building are important parts of showing love and doing justice.

From its very beginning, treating clients (“guests” in today’s parlance) with dignity, respect, and compassion has been a hallmark of New Hope. The following account from a 1984 newsletter is an example of compassion in action by one of New Hope’s directors:

Sharon and her son came to New Hope for bread one cold and icy day. I was busy and not paying much attention to her, but as they were about to leave I heard her say to her son who had on a lightweight, too-small jacket, “Pull your jacket up around your neck, we have a long walk.” I asked, “Where are you walking to on a day like this?” She explained that she had a toothache and was going to the Health Center. There were clients waiting to see me, and the phone was ringing off the hook, but I said to her, “Just wait, I’ll take you over there, and call when you’re finished and I’ll take you home.” An hour later, Sharon called. I was with a client and the volunteer told her that I’d be there shortly. Fifteen minutes later Sharon called again, wondering where I was. The volunteer assured her I was coming but that I was still busy with a client. Finally I told the next client in the office to wait for me, that I’d be right back.

When Sharon got into the car she was very quiet. Then she said, “What were you doing when I called the first time?” I became annoyed at the question because of how busy and rushed my day had been, and with all the love I could muster, I told her I was counseling with a client. Then she asked, “And what were you doing the second time I called?” I explained I was counseling the same client. Then she said, “And what are you going to do when you get back to the office?” I said, “I’m going to see the client I asked to wait while I came to get you.” “Wow,” she said. I turned and looked at her, “What do you mean, Wow?” She said, “You make me feel so important that you would stop everything you were doing just to come and pick me up.”

I stopped, caught my breath, and realized that my simple act had had a profound impact on Sharon. I shared with her that God loves her and that she is important to Him. I exclaimed, “Don’t ever forget that you are important, and that it’s a very little thing for me to take you to the dentist and home again.” In stillness I thanked God for this opportunity to show and speak of God’s love.

Here one sees the desire at New Hope to share the message of Christ’s love with guests and invite those who are interested to open their hearts to Jesus. There are Bibles in several languages, current copies of *Our Daily Bread*, and other relevant brochures prominently displayed and available in the reception area of every New Hope center. There are frequent reminders of God’s love throughout each center and a welcoming atmosphere of care for guests, volunteers, and staff.

Another example of staff exemplifying a humble servant attitude is this story by one of New Hope’s case workers. Beth called New Hope sobbing because she had just received a call from the school nurse asking her to pick up two of her children because they had head lice nits in their hair. Beth explained that she had already treated the entire family and invested so much money on special shampoo, dry cleaning, and furniture spray disinfectant—all of it a financial burden on their limited income. Beth had daily emotional ups and downs and now felt to-

tally overwhelmed. She couldn’t pick up the children because her car was inoperable, needing \$900 worth of repairs. Beth was so desperate she began talking about taking her children to foster care. Not how she expected to spend her day, the case worker purchased shampoo and comb, picked up the children, helped Beth comb the children’s hair and clean the house. More than that, the case worker had asked another client who lived alone to go along to help. The other client was excited for this opportunity. Beth made it through this crisis and was grateful that someone had cared enough and was willing to help. The case worker said the help given that day was not hard. It only required a willingness to go and making oneself available.

In 1988 two migrant families were living in a tent at a local campground. When they came to New Hope, one of the women was pregnant. They were without work, money, and most of all they were without hope. Later one of the families wrote a letter thanking New Hope for all that was done to help them and give them hope again.

I want to thank you for everything New Hope has done for us. You got us in a home, heat for us, food, gas; you name it, you have done it and we are very grateful for that. We have a beautiful baby boy. Thanks to New Hope, I have hope again in people. I know there are people out there who care about people.

The New Hope of 2023 is the legacy of those who sought to be obedient to Scripture and Jesus’s teachings about caring for those in need. Though none of the founders of New Hope had training or experience in social services and sometimes wondered what in the world they were doing and how they would manage it all, they acted in obedience and trusted that God would guide and provide.

Marian Musser was a member of the original task force that founded New Hope Ministries and served several stints on the board for a total of twenty-seven years, including seven years as chair and six as secretary. She and her husband attend The Meetinghouse Carlisle, PA. A comprehensive history of New Hope Ministries is available in the April 2023 edition of Brethren in Christ History and Life.

Straightening Our Compass Needles

By Timothy Lyne

IF YOU LISTEN, you can certainly hear the cynicism in Pilate's voice. But given his history as a Roman career politician and governor of Judea, I think you can also hear a weariness; weariness with the hypocrisy, lies, spies, favoritism, fear. I think Pilate's "What is truth?" response to Jesus clearly defines the context of the time. Not to play with scripture here or diminish the importance of that moment, but I strongly suspect Pilate may have had the same reaction to "Peace," "Love" or "Mercy" had any of those come up instead.

If you're tempted to believe, in this present age, that the needle on our collective moral compass is bent either to the right or left, it may be helpful to keep in mind that every "present age" (beginning long before Pilate) has dealt with bent needles; Crusades, World wars, holocaust, racism, inequity in every form. It's tempting to retreat like Elijah, or reinforce our needle-leaning by listening to only those voices that reinforce our particular "bent." It's interesting to note that it was in the quiet that Elijah could hear God's still, gentle voice. I don't know if you or I could hear God's voice very clearly over the cacophony of angry, talking heads that seem to be present on every social platform today. Elijah was also reminded that there were many who hadn't succumbed to the evil of the age. It is immensely comforting to me to know that while the difficulties of this present age may/always get front page coverage, there are many, many faithful folks who diligently labor in the quiet, whose desire is to simply serve God. Maybe that's you.

So, how do you and I do that? How do we help straighten the needle? By turning Pilate's cynicism on its head. If our attitude is that of Pilate, we're essentially standing in the bottom of a hole looking down, where the view never changes and things remain the same. But if we can take a big spiritual deep breath, reflect the hope that is within us as Christians while still acknowledging that things aren't as they should be, degree by degree we take the kink out of the compass needle.

The good news is that Jesus gave us a very simple formula for bringing lofty principles down from their perch and into everyday life. "Do to others as you would like them to do to you." (Luke 6:31, Living Bible). Want to see more justice in the world? Be more just with family, friends and strangers. Want to see more peace in your life? Work at being at peace with your family, friends and strangers. Want to see more love? Love others better. Do you need mercy? Show mercy to others.

As a staff member at Paxton Ministries, I was very fortunate to see those lofty principles of justice, love, peace, and mercy at work in the lives of the residents and staff every day that I served there. When you consider that Paxton Street Home housed, fed and provided all types of care for eighty-five adult men and women who are mentally, intellectually, and/or poverty challenged, this was no small feat; there was potential for cynical thinking every day, to stare at the bottom of the hole, and we worked (and prayed) to avoid that.

As you may imagine, the back stories of some of the residents were often tragic, traumatic. Abuse of all kinds was encountered—physical, mental, financial. Some had been homeless, others had lived in unsafe and dangerous circumstances. Many important life decisions were made for them by family members, health care providers, or social service agencies—mostly well intentioned, some not. We grieved that injustice. It took constant/consistent love and patience to encourage these folks to look up. And because we live in a fallen world, not all of them did. We grieved that as well.

But there were also residents who had histories of loving families and encouraging friends who stayed in touch and would visit. We, all of us, welcomed days full of lightness and laughter. Maybe your home is like that. You are blessed and fortunate if it is.

And as is often the case, the ones ministering on many occasions became the ones ministered to. My wife Cathy and I have wonderful memories of moments where God clearly used a cheerful word from a res-

ident to raise our heads, lift our spirits. Paxton Street Home was a place where the air we breathed seemed infused with "Do unto others," a place where, degree by degree, bent needles were made straight.

Martha, a woman in her sixties, had recently come to Paxton through the county Social Services Agency. Shortly after she arrived she asked me to take her shopping at the dollar store on the trip out that evening. She grabbed a cart and we walked together down the aisles with Martha picking things up, looking them over and either putting them in the cart or back on the shelves. When we got to the register, she had a number of items in the cart and it took the cheerful young lady behind the counter a minute to ring everything up. "That will be \$18.00." Martha stood there. I stood there. I said, "Martha, it's \$18.00. Martha handed me her purse that contained \$0.37. Not enough for even one item in the cart. I didn't know it then, but Martha couldn't read or write. She couldn't tell you what time it was or tell you the difference between a one dollar bill or a hundred. And here we were with a growing line of impatient folks behind us.

In a still, quiet and gentle whisper, the young lady behind the register smiled, leaned over to Martha, put her hand on hers and said, "It's okay Martha, just leave the cart here and I'll put the things back." You could almost hear a compass needle straighten out. Truth, love, peace and mercy. It's too bad Pilate wasn't there.

Timothy Lyne is retired from serving as operations manager at Paxton Ministries, Harrisburg, PA. He works part-time as the facilities manager at the Grantham Brethren in Christ Church where he also often plays bass for the worship team.

Doing Justice Through Open Conversations

By Nick Ressler

I LOVE OUR denomination and have an affinity for our history. I grew up on the stories of our missionaries, small Sunday school classes starting Bible camps, and whole families picking up their lives to plant new churches. I have watched many generations of my family try to live out the values of this denomination. I myself fell in love with the diversity in the style of worship and teaching from location to location, but with a commonly-held understanding of the centrality of Christ. As I grew, I began to appreciate and understand Jesus's distinct, unwavering, and countercultural invitation for his followers to engage in the work of peace and justice, and I have treasured our denominational work at heeding this call. I also believe that we should join together to seek to improve where we may have failed.

Like many other denominations, Brethren in Christ value dialogue and conversation, but it seems to me that in recent years this value has been severely tested. When a topic is controversial, the rules of engagement are not clear, there is little or no denominational guidance for dialogue, and injustices are done to both congregational leaders and members, not to mention the denomination as a whole. This leads to increasingly individualistic identity formation that doesn't always conform to Brethren in Christ theology and values. In some cases, pastors' credentials have been revoked, causing much pain and trauma. Could that pain be avoided with more regular corporate engagement with some of these issues? What might it mean to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God as we find ways to engage in dialogue, to have meaningful conversation? Here are three examples of current issues that I believe need open dialogue. Perhaps you can think of others.

First, we have a definitive theological belief about human sexuality that has not changed in many decades, but we haven't talked about it much. Some would say defensively, "That is simply untrue! We have a position paper that has recently been rewritten. We had an impact seminar. Some leaders at-

tended a Preston Sprinkle conference. What more could you want?"

I'll give credit where credit is due, but those steps have been few and far between, and I believe they have lacked the necessary depth to prepare pastors and leaders to engage parishioners in in-depth conversations. They have given answers to predetermined questions that amount to apologetics at the most basic and cursory theological levels. Many of the sessions and speakers have simply helped participants conclude that the topic is "complicated." We need more, and I believe it is the denomination's responsibility to provide credentialed leaders with the resources they need. If the denomination doesn't do this, then the local leader has to be the denominational proxy with families that are working through this issue. And what if there is disagreement?

A second issue is women in ministry. Ahead of the affirmation of women in ministry in 1982, we published papers on the theological reasons for the decision. We asked credentialed women to speak at General Conference, appointed women as pastors, to the General Church Board, as bishops, missionaries, and more. We made it a point to reaffirm our theological position at General Conference in 1992 and again in 2017, and we enjoy declaring that our denomination is egalitarian. At the same time, we have credentialed pastors who do not agree with an egalitarian theological position and who have deliberately stood in the way of women in ministry. Others are unclear where they stand and yet their credentialing is renewed. We are a divided denomination on an issue that is more than forty years old and supposedly decided definitively.

In 2022 at General Assembly, we barely passed a resolution to change the *Articles of and Faith and Doctrine* to tighten up this language and make it completely clear that we are egalitarian. We need to vote and pass it a second time in 2024 for it to be final. We pride ourselves on being a "family," yet we have done nothing to close the division. Why aren't we talking about this disagreement?

Why aren't we having more discussion and education to close the gap? Is this fair and just to all the women who have been credentialed during the last forty years? Is it fair and just to the many voices who spoke against the motion at our 2022 gathering? Are we speaking with integrity when we declare that our denomination is one that "fully affirms women in ministry leadership at all levels of Church Life" (Women in Ministry Leadership Statement, Brethren in Christ U.S., August 28, 2017)?

A third issue is the status of Evangelicalism in the denomination. We began as a blend of Anabaptism and Pietism, and added Wesleyanism in the late nineteenth century. In the middle of the twentieth century, we associated ourselves with Evangelicalism to bring us out of our sectarian stance and help us more effectively reach more people. However, Evangelicalism has never officially been added as a fourth stream, and we seem intent on ignoring the warning from one of the denomination's most beloved theologians regarding the cost of doing so. See "Three Streams in Our Heritage: Separate or Parts of a Whole?" by Luke L. Keefer Jr., *Brethren in Christ History and Life*, April 1996.

Evangelicalism in North America has come to mean and describe so many things that to use the word is to conflate it, deliberately or not, with a sociocultural identity and movement that is far from our Brethren in Christ identity. Frankly, I believe we should be insulted when anyone suggests that it is a current and fourth stream of influence. Do we train, engage, or discuss with our pastors and leaders how to nuance the difference between the cultural evangelical and the theological evangelical? Do we ever explain why in some core courses we call Evangelicalism the fourth stream, but in none of our official documentation is it referred to as such? Do we talk about Keefer's warnings about the toll Evangelicalism will eventually take on our identity as Brethren in Christ?

In her article, "A Giant Bag of Core Values': Findings from the 2021 Brethren in Christ Pastoral Identity Portrait Project,"

Lisa Weaver Swartz noted her finding that our identity is fragile and familial (see *Brethren in Christ History and Life*, August 2022). Figuring out our identity requires conversation with the family about who we are and who we are not. We must know the “why” behind what we choose and what we reject. It isn’t about preserving “the good old days” or holding onto things that need to be let go. It isn’t about gatekeeping and only allowing for “cradle-BICs.” It’s about identifying, declaring, and knowing who we are so that we are confident about what fits our family and what doesn’t. It is not fair for us

to be unclear and not provide avenues for discussion and discernment.

Unfortunately, we have left the local pastor to educate his or her congregations on all these issues (and probably others), with little accountability beyond a standard six-year self-check-in. Is it possible that our focus on who we want to be when we turn 250 years old comes at the expense of who we actually are at 245? Even when the pastor or the church does not part ways from the denomination, this lack of processing sows seeds of discord and separateness. The longer we allow pastors and leaders to prepare them-

selves regarding complicated and divisive topics without any input from the denomination or opportunities for open dialogue, the more we are contributing to the lack of a common identity in core theological issues and making it more difficult to talk about the next divisive topic that will surely come.

Nick Ressler is pastor of the Conoy Brethren in Christ Church, Elizabethtown, PA.

God’s Call for Mishpat, Hesed, and Shalom

By Henry B. Johnson

AS A TEENAGER, I remember sitting in the front seat in the car of a dear old saint from church who ran through a stop sign. We got pulled over. She was overwhelmed, maybe a tad bit embarrassed, and just flustered. I fought with all my might to keep my juvenile snickering to a minimum. But then something remarkable happened. Of course, the cop knew Mrs. Loane—everybody knew and was taught by “Aunt Bette Ann” at some point in childhood. He even offered her a simple warning and a chance to be on her way. She would have none of that. I sat there even more amazed as she seemingly begged him to do his job and write that ticket.

Now for most of us, we may have just received that blessing, taken our warning, and been on our way. We would most definitely continue in the freedom that was afforded us that day. We would also, though, be free to either obey the laws of the road or keep running the stop signs. In the book of Micah, the people of God had for generations walked in their freedom by breaking all the rules. They were unfaithful to God. Their leaders in the faith and in government were corrupt. They consistently violated God’s law, oppressed the poor and powerless, favored the rich and powerful, and ignored God.

Towards the end of the book, we reach chapter six, where God is the aggrieved Judge who brings the people to court. The everlasting mountains and hills are witnesses as the formal charges are made by God. They listen

as God cites a record of faithful love to Israel: a love that redeemed them from slavery in Egypt, and gifted them Moses, Miriam and Aaron to lead, guide, and teach them; a love that saved them from enemies, protected their journey to promise, and revealed God’s power on their behalf; and a love also denied by the empty promises and praise provided by the people.

It is here that God offers for the people then (and us today), the book of Micah’s most famous words:

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:8).

God concludes the court case by inviting the people to do what is good: practice (mishpat) justice because God is just; love mercy (hesed) because God is merciful, and to walk humbly or wisely (shalom) with God because God humbly walks with us. The implication here is simple: if you really love God, you will serve God, live like God lives, love like God loves. Walter Kaiser in his book *Hard Sayings of the Bible* says that the main point of Micah 6:8 can be said to be that considering how Yahweh (God) has saved us, “the natural consequence of truly forgiven men and women [is] to demonstrate the reality of their faith by living it out in the marketplace.” Kaiser continues, “such living would be accompanied with acts and

deeds of mercy, justice, and giving oneself for the orphan, the widow, and the poor.”

Israel knew God is just because of the law. In Deuteronomy 24:17-22, God commanded his people not to mistreat foreigners, the fatherless, or widows, and instituted a social reform designed for those who are well off to provide for the oppressed. Micah joins a long line of prophets (Ezekiel, Hosea, Malachi, etc.) in critiquing Israel and even her priests for not properly shepherding the flock. When the people fail to do God’s justice (mishpat), they fail to act like God, and they fail in helping their neighbors.

Israel knew that God loves mercy (hesed). They saw God’s mercy because he is the God who created everything but chose to bless them (Abram and his descendants). They saw God’s mercy in their rescue from slavery and suffering in Egypt, provision of bread from heaven and water from a rock, compassionate forgiveness when Israel sinned and turned to other leaders or idols. God did not abandon them in the wilderness, but led them by day and night, and sustained them for forty years in the wilderness. When the people failed to love with hesed, the way God loved them, they failed in their witness as light to the nations.

Israel knew that God walks humbly (shalom). God consistently left heaven to walk with Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Hagar, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph. God walks humbly, speaking the world into existence

but taking time to fashion humans out of clay, breathe life into us, and make us in the image of God. God walks humbly in giving us the freedom to choose whether or not to follow him. God walks humbly in creating his tabernacle from freewill offerings, making it intentionally small and with minimal furnishings (when compared to other temples in the Ancient Near East), and setting up a system to consecrate, clothe, and provide food for his priests, while being the all-powerful God of all creation but choosing to dwell inside a portable moving tent. When the people failed to walk humbly in shalom, they were not at peace with God, creation, family, neighbors, and even themselves.

The story of Israel should have confirmed to Israel that God is just, a lover of mercy, and walks humbly. The people of Israel in return should have been faithful as God was faithful. What did God require of them? To do God's justice, to love as God loved, and to walk in complete peace.

At our church in Harrisburg, we are com-

mitted to doing God's justice (*mishpat*) by making things right. We recognize that our world is not as it should be, and that Christ has left the Holy Spirit and the Church to proclaim good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners, sight for the blind, set the oppressed free, and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4:18-19). The law commanded justice by calling for care and commitment to God and neighbors far and near. We obey by welcoming our neighbors, celebrating their cultures, and learning from them to see God in new ways. We serve our neighbors by feeding them, equipping them in the learning of English, prepping them to study for citizenship, and helping them transition to life in this beautiful, strange place.

We are to love mercy (*hesed*). *Hesed* is God's love in action because God is love (1 John 4:7-8). It is God's love for all people, but particularly the disadvantaged and to the weak. *Hesed* is God's *agape* love, God's unmerited favor, and God's love that is not out of obligation. *Hesed* is God's favor and grace,

God's faithfulness, lasting loyalty and kindness. We obey by asking forgiveness for good left undone, and praying for opportunities to forsake neutrality which only helps the oppressor. We serve through doing life together and navigating journeys of healing that bring our people from oppression to liberation in Christ.

We are to walk in peace (*shalom*). As followers of Christ, we have peace with God (Romans 5:1), so we live to share that good news with all others. In Christ we can have peace with the creation all around us, so we live to care for the greater good of the world. In Christ we can have peace with others, so we live in this polarized world dependent on the Holy Spirit to guide us and the Church to equip us to be peacemakers who bring light and reconciliation.

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counts, we see Jesus walking humbly with God, the very mission of his life oriented around fellowship with his Father (or as the Good News Translation puts it "liv[ing] in humble fellowship with [his] God."). He goes off to pray or retreats from the crowds to a secluded place. When he does this, the need has not dissipated, yet Jesus knows he needs the fellowship of the Father in order to find restoration in his presence, to maintain alignment with his Father's heart, and to seek discernment along the journey.

Then when he returns or is drawn back to the crowds, his sense of his Father's work is heightened. He sees the physical needs of others and responds with generosity. He sees the people's spiritual hunger and thirst and responds with compassion. He sees the oppression of "the least of these" and responds with holy indignation and solidarity with the oppressed.

Jesus practices the intimacy he has cultivated with his Father through his overflow of justice, mercy, and humility. Campolo frames this idea as "praxis" and posits, "Our intimacy with Christ is best developed in the

context of carrying out our responsibilities, as Christians, together in a community" (188). True acts of justice and mercy pave the pathway for *shalom*, ushering in the not-yet kingdom to the here-and-now.

According to Thomas Merton (in *Thomas Merton Spiritual Master: Essential Writings*), "He who attempts to act and do things for others or for the world without deepening his own self-understanding, freedom, integrity, and capacity to love, will not have anything to give others. He will communicate to them nothing but the contagion of his own obsessions, his aggressiveness, his ego-centered ambitions, his delusions about ends and means, his doctrinaire prejudices and ideas."

Many people throughout the course of time have done justice and loved mercy, and they may have effected social change or removed one more brick from an oppressive system, but apart from walking humbly with God on the way, their efforts are only temporary and do not ultimately meet the requirement of God for *shalom*.

In the end, our good works do not save us or others. But they are evidence of God's

Spirit actively at work deep within those who walk humbly with him, molding and shaping us and then calling us forth in the spaces and places in which he's planted us to reveal and usher in the justice and mercy inherent in his kingdom.

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Editor's Notes:

- ▶ If you haven't renewed your subscription for 2023, please do so soon. You can renew online at bicus.org/resources/publications/shalom/.
- ▶ The Fall 2023 edition will explore our identity as Brethren in Christ (based on Project 250's first goal of reaffirming our identity as a community of Christ-followers.)
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Reflections on Micah 6:8

By Kerry Hoke

MY HUSBAND'S AUNT owns a cabin along Pine Creek in Northern Pennsylvania. I'm always arrested by the stillness, such a contrast from the noisy pace of my day-to-day life and mind. In the quiet of the early morning or at the hush of dusk, the creek waters often get markedly still, and when they do, the most vivid reflection appears, a mirrored image of the trees and foliage that line the bank and crowd the mountain that swells upward.

This kind of vivid reflection is described in Micah 6:8: "He has told you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (NIV). Justice, mercy, and humility are the very heart and character of God. As we take time to be still in his presence, to intentionally seek him in the quiet and the hush, he restores our souls, and the rushing waters within us also still, and we begin to reflect back God's heart.

We need to understand this as a three-stranded mandate: doing justice, loving mercy (or kindness), and walking humbly with God. One is not meant to be divorced from the others.

Think back to basic chemistry class and mixtures vs. solutions. A mixture is a combi-

nation of substances that do not completely dissolve and, therefore, can be separated out. A solution is a combination of substances that are dissolved completely and can't be filtered out. God's list of what he requires is a solution. Micah 6:8 lists the parts of the solution that bring God pleasure and best reflects his heart—doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with him—and none can be separated from the others. They are completely intertwined and interconnected because they are the very essence of the heart of God.

—Justice without mercy and humility turns us into self-righteous zealots.

—Mercy without justice and humility turns us into indulgent saviors.

—Humility without justice and mercy turns us into ineffective doormats.

The Lord's "requirement" is not meant to be a heavy yoke or a checklist of drudgeries, though too often we are prone to performing moral acrobatics that are a vaporous illusion, a spiritual sleight of hand that damage the delicate fabric of our own souls and the souls of those we serve in the name of ourselves.

In a book entitled *The God of Intimacy and Action*, co-authors Tony Campolo and Mary Darling dig into this interplay between pursuit of divine intimacy and social action.

Campolo and Darling assert, "God-ordained spirituality, in one way or another, must involve a commitment to intimacy with Christ that results in evangelism and justice work. . . . Otherwise our spirituality becomes a form of arrested spiritual development that verges on narcissism" (207).

Instead, we RSVP to Jesus's invitation to "follow me," walking with God day to day. We engage in vital practices that cultivate intimacy in stillness, silence, and solitude, and from there, we discover an urgency to rightly call out the world's broken, unjust systems, to see others through eyes of mercy and kindness, and to respond with wise humility to its brokenness with the heart of God to restore his intended shalom.

Walking with God in humility, connecting to the Vine and planting our roots by the streams of Living Water helps us reflect more and more the heart of God from the inside out so that justice, mercy, and humility pour forth simply as an overflow of the heart of God within us.

For a living example of this trifacta, we turn to our model—the one on whom the Holy Spirit descended like a dove and over whom the Father spoke, "This is my Son whom I love. In him I am well pleased."

Over and over throughout the gospel ac-

Shalom!

A JOURNAL FOR THE PRACTICE OF RECONCILIATION

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Pursuing Peace in a World of Conflict

THE CALL TO peacemaking is a key focus of my Christian faith. I fully embrace the pursuing peace core value of the Brethren in Christ: “We value all human life, and promote forgiveness, understanding, reconciliation, and nonviolent resolution of conflict.” Just because I believe and am committed to practicing it, however, doesn’t mean I never have questions.

The war in Ukraine has raised these questions again—the same questions people asked during World War II and more recent conflicts in places like Syria, Congo, Rwanda, Bosnia, and elsewhere. When people are being mercilessly killed or fleeing their homes, perhaps never to return, what can or should we do to stop the violence? It’s tempting to want to support military intervention to stop the violence; it’s tempting to hope for Hitler, Slobadon Milosovic, or Putin to be destroyed.

And yet, and yet. . . . Violence usually begets more violence, and Jesus told us that we are to love our enemies. Do enemies include those who are responsible for horrific violence and the death of hundreds, thousands, even millions of innocent people for no good reason? What does that look like? How do we pursue peace right now as Russia rains down violence and terror on the Ukrainian people and as NATO supports Ukraine’s defense with weapons paid for by our tax dollars?

It often feels inadequate to pray and send money or make comforters and relief kits, but we should still do it. We can also renew our commitment as a Brethren in Christ

community of believers to determine contemporary applications of the first denominational peace statement in the 1770s: “the use of the sword is completely forbidden for revenge or defense” (from our earliest confession of faith). From that renewed commitment, we can redouble our efforts to teach peacemaking skills—how to do the work of rooting out the violence within us and learn practical tools for responding to evil nonviolent.

The world tells us that there is no effective response to violence except more violence, that instead of “turning the other cheek,” we have to fight back or else evil will win. It’s that old question intended to trap people who are committed to nonviolence: “What would you do if a member of your family was being attacked?” I honestly don’t know what I would do, but I hope that because I have tried to think through alternatives to violence, I would be able to imagine something better than a knee-jerk violent response.

This edition of *Shalom!* invites you to do the inner work of peacemaking, to imagine alternatives to violence and war, to confront the issues the war in Ukraine has raised (like why we seem to care more about Ukrainians who are suffering from war than Syrians, Congolese, Somalians), and to respond as Jesus commanded us: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.”

Harriet S. Bicksler, editor

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Enemies: A Natural Outcome of the Christian Calling

Facing Our Inner Violence

By Joshua Nolt

CHRISTIANITY CAN OFTEN be an abstraction. Something of God that is true and right and good is spoken of and promoted, often with a deficiency of personal reality and experience. Teachers, preachers, and theologians are common perpetrators, speaking of truths that are truth absent of an experience that would lead to authenticity, genuine authority, and humility. Church folk then follow the lead of their leaders, knowing what is good and yet not knowing what is good.

Within the context of the Anabaptist tradition, peace is one of those truths.

It is a dangerous thing to pursue peace without first being pursued by peace. There is a spirituality to peace preceding the work

of peace. Each of us must do the difficult work of confronting our inner violence before we speak or act to confront the violence of the world. If this inner violence is not first confronted, peacemakers will engage in peaceful work in ways not reflecting the Prince of Peace, with hearts ungoverned by the Spirit of peace.

Inner violence is something each person suffers at the hands of an aggressive and violent world. Inner violence can be described in many ways—as anger, frustration, angst, anxiety, worry, fear, rage, depression (latent anger). Perhaps a better way to describe it is by using the visual language of Genesis: it's the “chaos of the deep,” a stirring of the waters. The description of language is hardly necessary because most of us know it in our gut.

And herein lies our challenge: many times we respond from that gut. We advocate for what is good and right from a place of chaos. We call this chaos “righteous anger” in order to justify responding in anger, and in the process end up wounding others and ourselves.

Before we do the work of peace, we must first do the work of confronting our inner violence, and this is done by entering into silence. The best speech and action come from silence. Henri Nouwen puts it this way:

Words can only create communion and thus new life when they embody the silence from which they emerge. . . . Thus silence is the mystery of the future world. It keeps us pilgrims and prevents us from becoming entangled in the cares of this age. It guards the fire of the Holy Spirit who dwells within us. It allows us to speak a word that participates in the creative and recreative power of God's own Word (Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, p. 41).

God's own Word is Jesus. A number of years ago, in the midst of an intense time of conflict, I was drawn back to the gospel stories of Jesus before the Jewish and Roman powers at his crucifixion. When I went back to read these stories again (Matt. 27:11-14,

Mark 14:55-62),

I noticed something I hadn't noticed before. When the leaders spoke a word of truth about Jesus, he responded affirmatively, but Jesus remained silent during the flurry of accusations. No defense. No rebuttal. Just silence.

Where did this ability to be silent come from? How could Jesus engage with the powers in this way that “amazed” them?

Flip back a few pages in either gospel and you'll find Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, dealing with his own inner violence. That's right, just like you and I, Jesus was dealing with his own inner violence. We do an injustice to the beauty of Jesus's life when we exempt Jesus from his humanity. Listen to the way Matthew describes his “stirring of the waters” in the NRSV, which provides the most descriptive language:

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be **grieved and agitated**. Then he said to them, “I am **deeply grieved, even to death**; remain here, and stay awake with me.” And going a little farther, **he threw himself on the ground** and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.” (Matt. 26:36-39, bold for emphasis).

Do you notice the embodiment of the psalms in Jesus's experience here? Jesus brings his grief and agitation to God, throwing himself down in prayer, resolving it with trust in his Abba.

The action of Jesus is instructive to those who want to pursue peace. Before standing before the powers and bearing witness, we must first present our own inner violence to God. One of the most beautiful things we see of the nature of God in Christ is the ability of God to absorb the violence of the world.

Our inner violence must go somewhere, and God wants us to bring it Godward. If we



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do not do this, our inner violence will be transmitted—most likely heaped upon our enemy who we are called to pray for, love, and bless.

A spirituality of peace first faces one's own inner violence. I leave you with a simple prayer practice to walk through as you notice and give your inner violence to God, preparing you to be a person of peace who works for peace. This practice has no timeframe,

but its fruit is peace and a readiness to share the "gospel of peace."

1. Spend a few moments in silence, and ask the Holy Spirit to reveal the inner violence. Where are the "waters stirring"?
2. Spend a few moments expressing these things to God, verbally through prayer or reading a psalm. Don't hold back.
3. Spend a few moments of silence picturing Jesus with you and hearing Jesus speak

these words to you: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you."

4. Close with the words of St. Francis: "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace." Amen.

Joshua Nolt is senior pastor at the Lancaster (PA) Brethren in Christ Church.

Dispelling the Myths

By Keith Miller

PEACE ISN'T NEARLY as popular as slogans may lead us to believe. Living as people of nonviolence and justice often leads us into a homeless space in our world, unable to fit neatly into any political ideology or national identity. We are looked at as peculiar and idealistic, sometimes seen as having nothing meaningful to contribute to the conversation during times of war.

Many who grew up in the historic pacifist tradition may not see a peace witness as radical. However, as a pastor of a congregation with little Anabaptist ancestry, it's absolutely crucial that we continue laying foundations for such a worldview. I would also contend that even within deeply rooted peace traditions, this foundation must continue to be strengthened.

So what do we do as disciples? We start, of course, with Jesus. We frequently cite the clear teachings of Jesus when we consider nonviolence, but the nonviolent witness of Jesus is equally compelling. On the cross, Jesus absorbs the power of the world's violence, refusing to cycle it back into society. He puts an end to the need for retribution, forgiving and enduring rather than perpetuating. His position is not powerless. Indeed, it initiated one of the most significant movements the world has seen. The futility of the world's violent ways is highlighted by the radical love of Jesus. Jesus exposes "the myth of redemptive violence," to quote Walter Wink's famous phrase.

The same upside-down reality can be true of his disciples. When the world's violence swells, the creative and non-resistive witness of the Church can highlight the futility of vi-

olence and the sanctity of every human life. There is no winner in a war. Even those who are outwardly victorious take great losses to mind, spirit, and soul. This is what compelled Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to declare in 1963 that "The chain reaction of evil—hate begetting hate, wars producing more wars—must be broken, or we shall be plunged into the dark abyss of annihilation."

With Jesus as our guide, we make a case for a nonviolent way of life. But when the violence isn't against us specifically, what might the Church's role look like? Do we simply stand aside?

Our answer will inform the way we enter conversations happening right now surrounding the Ukraine, and the ones that will happen in the coming months as violence continues.

Jesus helps us resist the lie that violence is inevitable in our world. But in our churches, it's time to dispel other myths that we've adopted too—most of which we don't want to admit at all. But let's humbly acknowledge that we often reflect the values of the world around us more than Jesus in these areas.

Myth #1: Those whose lives and appearance match ours are more worthy of compassion.

The aggression from Russia is horrific and should be global news as we offer support, solidarity, and humanitarian aid to the Ukraine. But violent conflict has been happening in Syria, in Yemen, in Iraq, and in Afghanistan for years. Boko Haram is currently bombing and destabilizing cities in Nigeria. What is it that makes us see and

take notice so much now? Yes, there is a higher risk for global conflict here, but why so many Westerners so deeply and publicly moved by what's happening? We need to acknowledge an uncomfortable truth, made clear by the news reports themselves:

- NBC Reporter on location: "To put it bluntly, these are not refugees from Syria, these are refugees from Ukraine. . . . They're Christian, they're white, they're very similar."
- CBS Reporter on location: "This is a relatively civilized, relatively European city where you wouldn't expect that, or hope that it is going to happen."
- French Nation broadcast: "We're talking about Europeans leaving in cars that look like ours to save their lives."
- BBC reporter: "What's compelling is looking at them. . . . These are prosperous middle class people . . . these are not obviously refugees getting away from areas in the Middle East. . . . They look like any European family that you would live next door to."

Our racial and economic biases are highlighted in times of war. Even in the horror of war, some victims are seen as more worthy of mercy. Father, forgive us for our racism and economic inequality and tribalism. Father, forgive us for when we decide that those who are like us are more worthy of compassion.

Ukraine is worthy of our mercy, compassion, and solidarity. So are those who do not look like us, who do not live like us, and who are not economically similar to us. When we notice ourselves compassionate for people who are like us, while suggesting that this is

the first warlike conflict our world has faced in decades, we must learn to own our racial bias. We need Jesus to teach us about his peacemaking approach, which included compassion and care to all the different—the Samaritans, the women, the Gentiles, and the Romans. Anyone who suffered was worthy to receive care. This is our model.

I believe this looks like acting with compassion toward Ukrainian homeless refugees and toward Russian citizens who are struggling to afford food due to their leader's power-obsession. We grow in awareness of the violence around our world that isn't heavily reported on, and we lend our resources and intercession to the ones who are suffering in those places as well.

Myth #2: Prayer is inaction.

As people of Jesus, we believe in an upside-down kingdom, where power looks like powerlessness and leadership looks like servanthood. In a politicized world where "thoughts and prayers" are a clearly insufficient cop-out from the policies of justice, the Church must be careful to not accidentally devalue prayer in our own approach. Our Ukrainian brothers and sisters in Christ have consistently been asking for one primary thing from churches: Pray for us. Pray for

protection. Pray for peace. While a politician's thoughts and prayers may be nothing more than a slogan, the prayers of the saints are powerful in this upside-down kingdom. It is consistent with Jesus' teaching that we do not respond to evil with evil, but with something altogether different. People of compassionate action must never believe that interceding for peace isn't a powerful way to pursue nonviolence. We must go beyond the binary either/or approach.

Myth #3: Pacifism means standing by passively.

We have inherited an unfortunate linguistic connection between pacifism and "passivism." Peacemaking is active—we have opportunities in our connected world to send financial aid, to write to politicians, and to adopt sister churches in war torn areas. We can educate about effective nonviolent movements in history, and advocate publicly for nonviolent approaches to conflict.

Myth #4: Global politics are disconnected from our lives.

This one is tricky, because there is a slice of truth to it. However, when we disconnect the big conflicts of our world from the little ones, we forget that people are at the core of both. And when individual lives change,

societies begin to change too. So as holistic Christians who understand that God's world is connected and integrated, we know that when we oppose all forms of violence in our own relationships, we shape cultures and generations that can one day shape the world. When we choose to use gentle words and seek understanding, resisting the dehumanization of people we disagree with, we are doing the work of making the world a little more like God's kingdom. That's peacemaking too, and we live with the conviction that it's not disconnected from the global wars that we long to see end.

As a church, we are continuing to learn to make space for anger and lament, while still trusting Jesus to lead us toward hopefulness and compassionate action. We live in the hope that one day, all suffering will cease, and Jesus will bring about his kingdom in fullness, where nations will lay down their weapons of destruction and each life will be treated as sacred. Until that point, we do what we can and live in the tension. Lord, have mercy.

Keith Miller is pastor of the LifePath Church, Newark, DE.

Love Your Enemies!

By Jonah Langederfer

HAVE YOU SEEN the stories in recent years of shooters entering churches or synagogues and gunning down innocent victims? What should Christians do to prepare for violent intruders in the home or a Sunday worship service? Should we prepare to wield lethal force by getting a concealed carry gun? This is certainly not an easy question, but I bring it up because these conversations often show that instead of listening, much of the Church follows the world and our gut response and resists Jesus's clear teaching to love our enemy.

For example, when I was co-writing a paper in seminary with a military chaplain friend who wasn't and still isn't a pacifist, both he and I were surprised how clear Jesus was in his general command for Christians to love enemies, be people of peace, and ba-

sically reject violence. Yet, many evangelical churches like the ones we were both raised in resemble the world's way of hating enemy, are "gun-toting" and take up arms in war.

We can't begin to see clearly Jesus's way of peace, enemy love, and his will for the church in the midst of violent situations or war unless we first listen to Jesus: "to you who are listening I say: love your enemies" (Luke 6:27a). If we carefully listen to God's words to us through his Son's teaching in Luke 6:27-36, we'll be able to see what it means to love our enemies and the motivation Jesus gives to love our enemies.

What does it really mean to love your enemies? It doesn't mean returning evil for evil to those that harm us, but what does it look like? Love your enemy in action, word, and prayer. What does that mean?

First, "do good to those who hate you" (6:27b). Do you recognize the image on the opposite page? I first heard of Dirk Willems (the man on the left) in a core course on Brethren in Christ history taught by John Yeatts. After being tried and imprisoned for his Anabaptist views during the sixteenth century, Willems escaped from prison. Willems was chased and ran safely across a frozen lake, but his heavier captor fell through the ice and was helpless. Instead of fleeing, Willems chose to do good to his enemy by coming back to rescue him.

Second, "bless those who curse you" (6:28a). Not only does enemy love mean not insulting the bully who insults you, but it is wishing him good luck.

Third, "pray for those who mistreat you" (6:28b). The New Testament describes

prayer as the primary weapon God has given us to pursue peace in the world as we wage spiritual warfare, patterned after Jesus's prayer for his enemies while hanging on the cross (Luke 23:34). That Jesus prays for his enemies even while he is being executed shows us the most powerful thing we can do when confronted by an enemy. What is the most powerful force for peace in the Ukraine-Russian war? Prayer! Prayer pushes back the dark principalities and powers behind the human actors in war (Eph. 6:10-18).

Jesus is no idealist. He understands that enemies can be cruel and violent. What are you to do to those who physically harm you? Jesus says, "If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also" (Luke 6:29a). On one occasion, while Martin Luther King Jr. was delivering a speech, a member of the American Nazi Party walked up on stage and slugged him in the face. King was knocked back but regained his composure, stood up, and dropped his arms. The man proceeded to pound King in the face until the crowd intervened and hauled the Nazi off to another room. Shortly after, King visited the Nazi in the room and reassured him that there would be no harm done to him. King said that he was not going to press charges for the attack and that he had forgiven the man. King then returned to the stage, holding a bag of ice to his face, to finish his speech. No one in the room had doubts about who won the fight.

Jesus also knows that we will often encounter enemies who will take from us. How are we to respond to enemies in a ruthless world? Jesus gives this other-worldly command to love even those who steal from you: "If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them." Give to your enemies even if they are dressed up as beggars trying to take advantage of you, and if someone unjustly takes what belongs to you, don't demand it back (Luke 6:30).

Perhaps Jesus is losing us here: "Turn the other cheek? Really?" Didn't the conservative Edmund Burke once say: "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good

men do nothing." In other words, is pacifism actually passivism? Jesus is not teaching us to be passive. Ronald J. Sider, a Brethren in Christ minister, says that the biggest argument against pacifism is people who believe in peace but don't take responsibility for actively seeking peace and justice in the world.

What's the motivation to love our enemy? Wouldn't you want someone to graciously love you if you were being a jerk? Put it another way: If you were Willems's captor



drowning in the ice, what would you want Willems to do? We must let Jesus's teaching of enemy love allow us to engage in imaginative and sometimes unrealistic thought experiments that will shape the way we learn to love our enemies. If an intruder comes to your building with a gun, what if instead of imagining an enemy who is less than human we imagine the attacker as a family member suffering from mental illness? Wouldn't we try to do everything possible to pacify the situation rather than shoot first and ask questions later? Jesus's teaching of enemy love changes things.

After Willems loved his enemy, the guard was apparently unmoved by this gesture. He promptly seized Willems and placed him in an even more secure prison cell until, soon thereafter, he was burned at the stake. We might say, "See, loving your enemy doesn't work out!" But we are called to be faithful to Jesus's words even if it doesn't always personally benefit in the short run, though it will work in the long run! The resurrection of the crucified Messiah showed that the way of the cross leads to glory!

Is the Willems story a foolish tragedy, a loss? How about Revelation 12:11: "And martyrs have conquered [Satan] by the blood

of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death." Jesus is clearly calling us to love our enemy. The question we must ask ourselves, "Are we listening?"

Jonah Langederfer is the of the Pleasant Hill (OH) Brethren in Christ Church.

Editor's Notes

Subscription renewals: Many of you have already responded to the 2022 subscription renewal letter. Thank you for your renewals and extra contributions! If you haven't responded yet, please do so soon. The price for a one-year subscription is still \$20, with additional contributions welcome to help subsidize the cost of mailing overseas and sending one to each Brethren in Christ student enrolled at Messiah University. Checks should be payable to Brethren in Christ US and mailed to the editor (address on page 2).

Remaining topics for 2022: The topic for the summer edition has not been finalized, but topics under consideration are engaging in difficult conversations (perhaps addressing the "culture wars" that are causing so much polarization and division, even in the church) and making the church a welcoming place for those with disabilities. The fall edition will explore how Brethren in Christ US is working on the Project 250 goal of "Growing to reflect the [gender and racial] demographic realities of our communities." Please contact the editor if you have other ideas for topics or if you would like to contribute an article (contact info on page 2).

How to Remove a Dictator Without Firing a Shot

By Eric A. Seibert

THE NONVIOLENT OVERTHROW of Slobodan Milosevic

Dubbed the “Butcher of the Balkans,” Slobodan Milosevic was one of the most brutal dictators of the late twentieth century.¹ For thirteen years (1987-2000) he ruled the Yugoslav federation with an iron fist. Milosevic led Yugoslavia into catastrophic economic disaster with many living in desperate poverty on salaries averaging less than \$70 a month. Most chillingly, Milosevic authorized genocide in Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Kosovo. All told, approximately 210,000 people died and another three million became refugees.

Any attempt to overthrow Slobodan Milosevic violently would have been very risky and would likely have resulted in a great deal of bloodshed. Wisely, the people of Serbia tried a different approach.

Members of a student-led group called Otpor used a variety of nonviolent tactics that eventually eroded support for Milosevic.² These tactics included things like street theater and public support for arrested activists. They were also instrumental in uniting all opposition parties around a single political candidate, Vojislav Kostunica, to keep the vote from being divided among too many different individuals.

Otpor’s efforts paid off, with Kostunica winning the election. When Milosevic refused to accept the results, the people of Serbia participated in a general strike that slowly shut down the capital and brought everyday life to a halt. This culminated in a massive demonstration at the Serbian capital in Belgrade on October 5, 2000. Milosevic could no longer retain his hold on power. Kostunica, Yugoslavia’s democratically elected leader, took office on October 7, 2000. The people of Serbia had succeeded in removing one of the world’s most ruthless dictators—and they had done so without resorting to violence and with virtually no casualties.³

Violence is not the only way

Part of what makes Slobodan Milosevic’s removal from office such a remarkable story

is the way it challenges many conventional beliefs about violence and power. People generally assume violence is the most effective way (or even the only way) to respond to certain situations. Nonviolence is typically regarded as unrealistic, a nice idea but one that does not actually work in the real world. But nothing could be further from the truth. As Peter Ackerman and Jack DuVall observe:

The greatest misconception about conflict is that violence is always the ultimate form of power, that no other method of advancing a just cause or defeating injustice can surpass it. But Russians, Indians, Poles, Danes, Salvadorans, African Americans, Chileans, South Africans, and many others have proven . . . that other, nonviolent measures can be a force more powerful.⁴

This is precisely what the people of Serbia confirmed when they removed a dictator without firing a shot.

The success of nonviolent action in the twentieth century (and beyond)

Of course the nonviolent overthrow of Slobodan Milosevic is just one of many stories that could be told. Creative nonviolent struggle has been used frequently and quite successfully in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In a comprehensive study of 323 violent and nonviolent resistance campaigns between 1900 and 2006, Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan contend that nonviolent efforts often prove far more effective than violent ones. Specifically, they demonstrate that during this time period, “nonviolent resistance campaigns were *nearly twice as likely to achieve full or partial success* as their violent counterparts.”⁵

The importance of their study is not to suggest that nonviolence always works—it does not—but to demonstrate that nonviolence often works. There is nothing naïve or simple-minded about using creative nonviolent struggle to confront even the harshest and most repressive regimes. On the contrary, the historical record suggests that using nonviolent tactics strategically to achieve so-

cial, political, or economic change is really quite sensible. It may actually provide the greatest chance for success and the best hope that real and lasting change will occur.

Creative nonviolent action is consistent with the life and teachings of Jesus and should be freely utilized by Christians as they fight oppression and strive to “overcome evil with good” (Rom 12:21, NRSV).

For a relatively recent treatment of this topic from a Brethren in Christ author, see Ronald J. Sider’s *Nonviolent Action: What Christian Ethics Demands but Most Christians Have Never Really Tried* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2015). For something of a “how to” manual for engaging in nonviolent struggle, consider Otpor leader Srdja Popovic’s *Blueprint for Revolution: How to Use Rice Pudding, Lego Men, and Other Nonviolent Techniques to Galvanize Communities, Overthrow Dictators, or Simply Change the World* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2015). Clearly, violence is not the only way.

Eric Seibert is a professor of Old Testament at Messiah University and attends the Grantham (PA) Brethren in Christ Church where he serves on the Peace and Social Justice Commission. He is the author of several books, including *Disarming the Church: Why Christians Must Forsake Violence to Follow Jesus and Change the World* (Cascade Books, 2018), from which this article is adapted by permission from Wipf and Stock Publishers.

Notes

¹The following information about Milosevic and the effect he had on Yugoslavia comes from Joshua Paulson, “Removing the Dictator in Serbia—1996-2000,” in *Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20th Century Practice and 21st Century Potential*, Gene Sharp in collaboration with Joshua Paulson, 315–316 (Boston: Extending Horizons, 2005).

²This inspiring story is brilliantly told in *Bringing Down a Dictator*, DVD, directed by Steve York (Washington, D.C.: York Zimmerman Inc., 2001). The information in this paragraph and the next is based on that documentary. For a narrative description of these events, see Paulson, “Removing the

Dictator in Serbia.”

³According to the documentary *Bringing Down a Dictator*, only two people died in the takeover of parliament on October 5, 2000, one in a traffic accident and one from a heart attack.

⁴Peter Ackerman and Jack DuVall, *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: St. Martin's, 2000), 9, emphasis mine.

⁵Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephen, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press,

2011).

⁶Chenoweth and Stephen, *Why Civil Resistance Works*, 7, emphasis mine.

Running Peacefully Into Violence

By Zach Spidel

SOMETHING HAPPENED YESTERDAY (as I write this)—something I wish to process in this space because I think it may be relevant to this issue's concerns.

I heard the sounds of someone shrieking through my open living room windows. It was a sunny afternoon, but those sounds put ice in my veins. I ran onto our porch and looked toward the sound. I live two doors from our church and there, in the church yard, lay a woman face down with a large man above her, picking her up and throwing her down. He shook her and screamed at her while she continued shrieking.

I ran toward them with nothing but socks on my feet, praying all the while. I did not know what I was going to do. As I approached, I realized that I knew both people. I had prayed with them in the alley behind our church only a few Fridays before. A young couple seemingly in love, they had held one another gently and cried with me as I prayed for them in their troubles. Now everything was different. I yelled at D. (the young man) as I approached. “Get off her!” He looked up and I saw recognition on his face. He was in a rage: “Pastor, she f----- stole my phone! Give it back, b----!” he cried as he bent back down, grabbed her once more and threw her from her belly to her back. She moaned with what I could now see was a bloodied mouth.

That is when I reached them, I had slowed down to a fast walk for the last few feet. I wanted not to tackle the man but to insert myself between D. and M. (the young woman). I pushed, gently at first and then with greater force, to wedge myself between him and her. He kept trying to get around me. I kept trying to keep myself between him and her. I kept telling him to back away. He

wouldn't listen and while he had been reticent to knock me out of the way, I sensed he was gathering himself to get to her through me if need be. I didn't know what to do and couldn't think straight or formulate a plan. All I could do was react.

Just then a car pulled up. A young woman hopped out of the driver's seat, a baby in the back seat. She said her friend had called her and yelled for M. to get in the car. M. rushed that way with D. chasing after. As M. climbed into the car, D. wrapped his hands around her and began trying to pull her out. I wrapped my arms around D. and tried to pull him off her. The woman in the car peeled out with the three of us tangled up. D. and I fell backward while M. made it safely away.

D. screamed a string of profanities and demanded to know why I had “let her get away with my phone!” Adrenaline pumping and God's Spirit providing courage, I found myself much bolder than I would have thought possible and faced him squarely. I spent the next ten minutes (which felt like ten hours) laying out some hard truths rather directly for D. He never calmed down fully, but he did not attack me and he did start to breathe a little more deeply. When he tried blaming M. again, I told him I was done talking and asked him to contact me when he was willing to talk about his real problems.

This morning M. called me. She thanked me for intervening and wanted to tell me she was okay. Then she told me something amazing. The woman who had stopped was not her friend; she was a total stranger. That woman's line about being called to pick up M. had been a strategic lie (she had never used M.'s name, I recalled). This woman had stopped, at risk to herself and with her child



in the backseat, to rescue a total stranger. Had she not arrived when she did, I don't know what I could have done to stop D. from seriously harming M. As it happened, I prevented violence for those few crucial moments until God sent another helper to whisk M. away.

I relate all this to you with no sense of pride. The whole thing was chaotic and clumsy and I haven't had time enough to reflect on what I ought to have done. Moreover, the whole thing weirdly feels more like something I witnessed rather than did. I do think, however, that God was at work in that awful moment and that I can draw a few encouraging lessons from it.

First, I think Christians will be most successful in interrupting violence among those people for whom we have already been a peaceful presence. I believe that had I not met and prayed with D. a few weeks before, he would not have been so reticent about going through me to get to M.

Second, in a moment of crisis—in the midst of active violence—I could only react. But the instincts that shaped my reaction had, thank God, been formed over years of peace-oriented ministry. I intervened, even with a certain measure of physicality. But in those chaotic moments my posture, carriage, words, and actions communicated that I was an obstacle, not a combatant. D. never attempted to fight me directly in part, I think, because I never signaled that I was going to attack him. My ability to pull off this balance is due, I am sure, to the long previous shaping of my instincts within the church and not to

any plan I formulated in the moment. I think our interventions in violent situations will depend on the quality and duration of the spiritual training and taming of our fallen instincts much more than any plans we can formulate in the midst of such moments.

Third, I ran toward the violence and put myself into it alongside M. After that, I trusted in God and watched gratefully as God offered deliverance. I'm glad I did and

somewhat shocked. I think that's what we must be willing to do in violence and I pray I will be able and willing to do it again if I am called to it. Jesus entered the maelstrom of human violence and willingly suffered it. We must walk into it as defenseless as he was, willing to suffer if need be.

Zach Spidel is pastor of East Dayton Fellowship, Dayton, OH.

Fleeing War

By Kim Hoffman Spirek

“WAKE UP, KIM! We need to quickly pack to leave with our neighbors.” Those words definitely were not the first things I wanted to hear from my husband David on March 3, 2022. Groaning and half asleep, I quickly dressed, then ran around like a headless chicken throwing food, a couple home school books, some odds and ends into three bags. These were added to the ever-ready go-to bags. In a few minutes, we headed out with our neighbors toward the border, any border. We, along with our youngest daughter, were leaving behind 22 years of ministry in Ukraine (biblical education, pastoring, English outreach, disciple making, children's education). What lay ahead?

The first day, our two cars travelled to southwestern Ukraine. Normally an eight-hour drive, the first day's trip consisted of driving thirteen hours on pot-hole back roads. Needless to say, we arrived at our motel way after curfew. (Curfews have been in place since the war began in February.) After unsuccessfully searching for the motel for an hour, we met a police officer, who of course reminded us that it was past curfew. Exhausted, we explained to him that we had hurriedly left Kyiv that day. He kindly had us follow him to the motel.

Our troubles were not over yet. We rang the bell, and motel security came to the gate. We explained to him that our friends had made reservations for us. He, in response, asked for the name of the person who made the reservation. We gave the wife's name. He answered, “No, I need the family name.” Unfortunately, we knew only her first name. Hoping that our friends would still be up, my

husband called our neighbor, explaining the situation concerning the guard. When David repeated our friend's last name, the guard checked his paper, saw that it matched, and let us in.

We were finally able to sleep for a few hours. Later in the morning, we ate traditional Ukrainian dishes and left for the border, two and a half hours away. However, the car needed fuel, a task not easily accomplished. It took an hour of driving around before finding a working gas station. This unexpected delay should not have been surprising as there were shortages of many things. With the tank full, we started for the Romanian border but now alone. Thankfully, the drive was more peaceful compared to the previous day of tens of roadblocks and checkpoints. Although there was evidence of the Ukrainians' efforts to hinder Russia's advances, they were not as impressive as what we witnessed the previous day. Leaving Kyiv, we had seen various methods of roadblocks: two-meter-high piles of sandbags, concrete dividers, iron beams welded together, old trolleys, and piles of rubble. Often, cars had to serpentine down the road. I had the dumb idea of taking a picture of all this but was threateningly pulled over by gun-wielding soldiers who ordered that I delete the picture before being allowed to proceed down the road.

During the two days of driving to the border, we were trying to figure out where to cross. Many friends came forward with names of contacts in various countries. I sent hundreds of messages, letting people know our current situation as well as trying to fig-

ure out where to go. In the end, we chose to cross into Romania. There, we would be able to visit friends who could help us figure out the next steps. When we joined the 2.4-mile line of cars approaching passport control, we let out a sigh of relief. We were almost there! But alas, that was not the case. It ended up being another thirteen and a half hours before we reached the Ukrainian checkpoint. Thankfully, though, it only took thirty more minutes before we went through the Romanian checkpoint.

Driving out of Ukraine was, by far, the most stressful part of our experience since the war began. A small glitch occurred in trying to meet up with our Romanian contact the first night because we did not have a Romanian sim card. The meeting point was McDonalds, but which one? David drove around a bit, finally finding one. He was then able to use the restaurant's free wi-fi to call our new friend. After that, things have been pretty much smooth sailing.

Since crossing into Romania, we have been able to help in humanitarian efforts. It has been amazing to see how people have jumped in to help the Ukrainians who have lost so much. As Ukrainian refugees enter Romania, they are housed and fed. Many already have plans to travel elsewhere in Europe, so they are guided to the right connections. The country is providing free transportation (trains and buses) for them to cross into other countries as well as sim cards for their phones. We translated for them and provided listening ears for their stories. We have helped to load humanitarian aid into vehicles headed to places across the border as

well as to Kyiv. Personally, my favorite was connecting the Romanian team with Ukrainians, watching the two groups working together to get things distributed all over Kyiv.

There is no easy answer about how to respond to a crisis such as the war in Ukraine. Before it even started, many expatriates had already left the country. At first, some just drove further west, but as the threats started to become reality, most left the country. As of this writing, I only know of three couples and a single lady who is still in Ukraine. Most of them are caring for the physical and spiritual needs of the displaced people, people who often sleep in cold bomb shelters or

the subway and are going hungry as shelves are bare. Many of my Ukrainian friends have fled west or into EU countries, often leaving their husbands behind. Most of David's friends remain around Kyiv with many leaving their husbands behind because the government will not allow conscriptable men to cross the border. Our friends are horrified by the needlessness of the war but are grateful for the help from the global Christian community.

However, one thing is clear: the need to help each other, to let God's love be evident. In times of a world crisis, each of us should look beyond ourselves to the needs of those who are hurting and suffering. Feeding,

clothing, sheltering, lending a listening ear, dressing wounds, or sharing the Gospel can all serve as a positive witness of Christ's love. Only in Christ can people experience true peace and security. I used to end my emails to friends and supporters with "Serving Christ Together." Now, I end it with, "Serving Christ and Humanity." So, I choose to serve God and humankind.

Kim Hoffman Spirek had been serving as a missionary with her husband and children in Ukraine until forced to flee the war. She grew up in the Palmyra (PA) Brethren in Christ Church (now Encounter). Since she wrote this, she and her family have returned to the United States.

They Stretch Their Fingers

By Lois A. Saylor

that scene in the movie
where the hero, the desperate damsel
needs something just outside their reach

they stretch their fingers
reposition a shoulder
try to lurch a millimeter closer

I stretch out to help, but
I am a million miles away
I have no movie-magic to bring me closer

I stretch out in prayer instead
flinging my pleas to a god
further away than the first bang of the universe
and as close as my own spirit

I need the god-magic to reach your need

I keep asking, keep seeking
I am knocking on the god-door
I am stretching my reach towards you
one more millimeter
one more time
again and again

until we study war no more, and
find the peace that never left

Lois Saylor is an editorial advisor for Shalom! and attends the Harrisburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church. She wrote this while watching images of Ukrainians fleeing the war.

Responding to War in Ukraine

PRAY: For peace, for Ukrainians and Russians, for those providing emergency assistance, for leaders on all sides making decisions.

GIVE: Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) is also working on developing a long-term, response that will likely include psychosocial support and trauma healing, temporary emergency housing, emergency distributions of locally purchased emergency supplies such as blankets and food. You can also donate emergency supplies, such as relief kits or comforters, to your local MCC material resource center.

ADVOCATE: Contact your member of Congress or Parliament calling for peacebuilding efforts alongside development and humanitarian work. Ask for an emphasis on local peacebuilding as an alternative to foreign military interventions and operations.

WELCOME UKRAINIANS: Though MCC does not directly support refugee resettlement in the U.S., they can help you connect with refugee resettlement organizations and other resources.

For more information, go to mcc.org/stories/crisis-ukraine.

MCC Calls for Peace, Nonviolence in the Midst of War

By Rick Cober Bauman and Ann Graber Hershberger



WHAT DOES IT take to be people of peace in these times? It is challenging to watch people directly impacted by war in Ukraine and many other places like Colombia, Syria, Afghanistan and Ethiopia. Amid the devastation of war, how do we respond in a way that reflects Anabaptist values?

At MCC, our vision is to see communities in right relationship with God, one another and creation.



MCC staff member Anna made this pot of borscht while on kitchen duty at a refugee shelter assembled with support from MCC by a local Evangelical Baptist church in western Ukraine. The flowers were a handmade gift from her youngest daughter to mark International Women's Day on March 8.

This is a call to peace and active nonviolence based on our faith. Christian peacemaking starts with the belief that God has made peace with us through the gift of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Peacemaking is a response to Jesus's gift of grace and peace. We all continue to sin. All of us are complicit in systems of violence and oppression. We constantly fall short in proclaiming and living out Christ's peace. God's grace, however, empowers us to follow Christ as active peacemakers in a spirit of hu-

mility. (You can read more about our peace position in our publication, "Pursuing Peace: The Essence of Mennonite Central Committee.")

For MCC, peace is more than a wish, it's our work. We do this by partnering with grassroots and faith-based organizations and churches that actively work for peace and nonviolence, and with your support. We witness the power of people coming together with hope to respond to impossible situations and ensure the human dignity of all. We walk alongside communities in processes of conflict transformation and reconciliation. We experience the spaces of creativity and imagination that are opened when violence is not seen as an option.

From these relationships, we have learned that peacemakers have many tools they can use to create positive change. Gathering together in prayer and worship is a powerful response. Diplomacy, dialogue, disarmament, development, conflict resolution, peace education, active nonviolence and strategic peacebuilding are only a few other nonviolent approaches available to prevent war and to work for peace during war. A refusal to be enemies is a powerful way to reduce the harm of violence and build positive peace.

One way we engage in peacebuilding at MCC is through conversations with our governments. In response to the conflict in Ukraine, we ask the Canadian and United States governments to continue considering approaches that do not rely on military intervention or military support. We ask our governments to be global leaders in promoting the use of nonviolent tools such as diplomacy, disarmament, dialogue, the use of international law and support for grassroots peacemakers. We caution against the selling and providing of weapons or direct participation in military missions. We believe nonviolent leadership for peace-

ful resolution is a way that our countries can make a positive difference.

A focus on trauma healing and assistance to meet basic needs will continue to be urgently needed. We ask our governments to provide support for the most vulnerable, including Russians who are also deeply impacted by this conflict. We encourage careful deliberation around the possible unintended negative consequences of broad sanctions.

Christ invites us to step into the pain and suffering of others. The skills and tools we take into these encounters and learn along the way include: the ability to listen with care and patience, to mediate and resolve conflicts, to analyze political and historical real-



MCC partner, Kharkiv Independent ECB Churches, evacuated residents from Kharkiv, housing them at a local Christian school and the House of Hope, a senior's residence in their village community fifty kilometers (thirty-one miles) from Kharkiv.

ities, to seek out voices unheard, to support community-based actions, to be courageous allies, to imagine and create options and alternatives and to embody hope. We invite you to join us as we walk this path, together with all those impacted by wars and conflict.

Rick Cober Bauman is executive director of MCC Canada, and Ann Graber Hershberger is executive director of MCC US.

Hope Still Standing: Caring for the Most Vulnerable

By Jason Dueck

ON THE DAY that rockets began to rain down onto Kharkiv, Ukraine, Pavel* and a group from his church stepped outside, raised their hands and prayed. They turned in faith to God, seeking the protection of a seniors' home called House of Hope. The residence is in a village close to Kharkiv, where Pavel has been providing relief for people fleeing the conflict. And after more than a month of the continued destruction in Kharkiv and the surrounding area, House of Hope is still standing.

Still standing, too, is the hope that Pavel maintains. He is the leader of MCC partner in Ukraine KECB (Kharkiv Independent ECB Churches), which works to support the elderly, the sick and the poor. KECB is helping the most vulnerable escape the danger of the conflict by moving them to smaller villages around Kharkiv that have been less directly targeted.

Kharkiv is Ukraine's second-largest city and has been the site of some of the worst destruction by Russian military forces. Much of the city that once was home to 1.4 million people has been reduced to unlivable rubble. Some 80 per cent of the population has fled the city and the area around it. And while many have escaped to neighbouring countries seeking refuge, many Ukrainians are unable to flee the death and destruction, particularly those who are disabled, sick or very old.

KECB is based out of a village* near Kharkiv that is home to around 4,300 people. In addition to transporting people to safety, KECB is buying and making food and, more importantly, says Pavel, purchasing much-needed medicine.

"We have 47 people with epilepsy in this district and the authorities came to us with a request to help with medicine for these people. There are also 57 with diabetes, 54 with cancer, 27 including some children with asthma and 63 with thyroid conditions. We need very special medicine, not just what you buy when you have a cold."

Through the incredible outpouring of support from MCC donors across the world, KECB has received support to continue this life-saving work.

"For the people who are sick or disabled, it's very hard for them," says Pavel. "We've taken people out of places that the battle lines are very close to, like Slovyansk and Kramatorsk. Just yesterday, some brothers [from the church] set up a toilet so it could be adapted for those who can't move around on their own."

And for many of the people KECB is helping, physical needs are only one component of caring for them.

"There was an 84-year-old woman who was brought to us from the hospital. She did not see all the destruction and can't fully realize and believe that all this is actually hap-

pening. She needs to talk about it all the time. She has a house, which is now partially destroyed. She lives in the area of constant shelling, and it is not possible to return there now."

KECB's small fleet of vehicles travels to several villages in the area around Kharkiv every day, looking for anyone left behind who needs help. And through their base at House of Hope and the Christian school next door, they also prepare meals and food packages for as many people as they can, baking their own bread multiple times a day. Pavel says once the relief supplies have been distributed, the buckets that MCC relief kits are packaged in make great vessels for proofing large batches of dough.

"If we can't use all the bread in one day, we cut it and dry it so it can be eaten tomorrow or in the food packages," he says, holding up a five-gallon pail filled to the top with dried cubes of bread. "And we've distributed more than 11,000 food packages so far."

*Last names and specific locations are not used for security purposes.

Jason Dueck is a communications specialist from Winnipeg, MB. This article is courtesy of MCC News Service.

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and congregationally as part of a problem in historic peace churches.

As Florer-Bixler continues to explore the idea of enemies, she speaks to the "old order" and to the "reign of God." The old order is the world of dominance ruled over by powers and principalities in which political, economic, and social structures find their power. The reign of God is the kingdom of God. Her "reign" terminology highlights that God is active. He is reigning, working, ruling. The book looks at the power of Mammon or wealth in the old order as well as racism, sex-

ism, and whiteness. She calls us to look at how we may still be under the dominance of these old order powers and how to break free of them. Not letting any of us off the hook, she says each of us is both victim and victimizer. She looks to Jesus to redeem us from both stances and bring us more fully into the reign of God.

There is plenty in this book to challenge us. There will undoubtedly be areas of resonance and areas of disagreement. Yet, the basic premise—that living under the reign of God will put us at odds with those invested

in the current power structures—helps us orient ourselves in the world. As we are called to love our enemies and forgive them, we note that the assumption is that we will have enemies. Florer-Bixler calls us to not be afraid of having enemies, but shows us how to have an enemy and do it well as part of the work of peace.

Lois Saylor is an editorial advisor for Shalom! and attends the Harrisburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church.

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BOOK REVIEW

Enemies: A Natural Outcome of the Christian Calling

By Lois A. Saylor

JESUS MADE ENEMIES. He may have loved them. He may have forgiven them seven times seventy, but he made enemies because he did not keep silent to avoid the anger and enmity of others. So, if Jesus made enemies, should we? Enemy-making is not the goal but advocating for truth angers those who trust in lies. Advocating for the marginalized can anger the privileged. Working for justice can anger those benefitting from the status-quo. Even challenging someone's worldview or material comfort can raise ire. And telling religious-leaders they are vipers and snakes tends to anger them into wanting to silence you, even to the point of using the legal system and execution to do so. Jesus made enemies.

Melisa Florer-Bixler tackles the issue of enemies in her book, *How to Have an Enemy: Righteous Anger & the Work of Peace*. (Let's underscore the last part of that title, "the Work of Peace.") She writes, "Jesus does not call us to claim we no longer have enemies. Instead, he shows us how to have enemies well." While maintaining that enemies will arise, she also notes:

Jesus reshapes expected and naturalized categories of enemies. Jesus overcomes

national and ethnic barriers and reveals that the true enemy is the person who stands against the reign of God.

With this understanding, she makes a clear stance as to who and what the enemy is and explores issues of family, politics, anger, forgiveness, mammon or wealth, whiteness, and an overall approach to the idea and reality of "enemy."

Describing "enemies," Florer-Bixler writes:

I use the language of enemies in this book to describe a relationship between people, one that recognizes how a person uses their power, actively or passively, to harm or dominate another. When there are enemies, one is in power over the other, or there is a conflict over who holds power.

She notes that power in and of itself is not bad. Empowerment helps people and we "need power to act." Her warning for the church, however, is that we often hold unity as the highest good while ignoring the imbalance of power and the harmful "dynamics of racial, gendered, and class power . . . with devastating consequences." A surface unity only serves to hide harmful power dynamics

and therefore cannot address them or change them to bring in true unity. When we call for unity in the church, do we mean we want to silence voices or raise up voices so conflicts can be openly addressed?

In addressing conflict and anger, Florer-Bixler suggests that "anger acts as a signal to draw attention to a harm or a wrong." In this light, anger is not a threat, but rather a place of potential to right a wrong or solve a problem. Anger offers "potential strength and clarification for the work before us." The author would like to see the church create a space for anger and a space for differences. At the same time, she calls for careful discernment to make sure that harmful power imbalances do not turn this space from one of resolution to one of manipulation. Instead, she calls for the church to use anger, especially anger at injustice, as a "creative force to build something new."

She also asserts that, "when anger takes form in communal sharing, it can carve the path toward reconciliation," whereas submerged anger runs "the risk of falling into passive aggression or moralizing self-righteousness." These are two profound risks we should look at very closely both individually

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The Economics of Justice

IN AN ARTICLE in *Christian Century* in January 2020, entitled “Kindness, Kinship, and the Boundaries of Justice,” Amy Peterson explored the roots of the word kindness and its relationship to kinship and family inheritances. The word “kindness” is rooted in “kin,” as in family, and also in “kyndnes,” the right to a title or piece of land (an inheritance). Thinking of kindness this way led Peterson to explore how, in the United States, inherited wealth (what she calls transformative assets) benefits white people more than black people.

She cites researchers who found that “among college-educated black families, about 13 percent get an inheritance of more than \$10,000, as opposed to 41 percent of whites. And about 16 percent of those white families receive more than one such inheritance, versus two percent of black families.” The average white family inheritance is \$150,000 compared to less than \$40,000 for black family inheritances. Inheritances or transformative assets enable their recipients to pay off student loans, buy a house, move to a better neighborhood with better schools, etc. Other research has shown how discriminatory housing laws contributed to the systemic racism that continues to make wealth accumulation more difficult for blacks than for whites (see *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History About How Our Government Segregated America*, by Richard Rothstein).

Peterson concludes: “Kindness is about seeing the image of God in everyone, outsiders and insiders, and learning to love our

kin in ways that don’t oppress others. Kindness sometimes may require this redistribution of wealth as a part of justice. To have this sort of kindness requires real strength.”

Indeed. How many other examples of economic injustice require the same kindness? How do we go about implementing this kind of Jubilee thinking? Is it even possible? Given huge wealth and income gaps worldwide, and the amount of human suffering and misery they cause, don’t we have an obligation to do something, especially as Christians called by God to love our neighbors as ourselves?

This edition of *Shalom!* examines these questions and begins to offer some possible answers. Bishop Lynn Thrush opens the discussion by inviting us not to dismiss Jubilee thinking as unworkable, and other writers echo the theme. Others tell stories of what they are doing through their organizations to begin the hard work of reducing economic injustice and meeting human need.

I am well aware of how economically privileged I am, so one of the most challenging and convicting passages in the New Testament for me is this one: “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action” (1 John 3:17-18 NRSV). What about you? What can and should genuine help look like? How do we love those in economic need with truth and action?

Harriet S. Bicksler, editor

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Jubilee-Themed Economics

By Lynn Thrush

THIS IS A pretty clear memory: early in my pastoral ministry, about 40 years ago, I heard one of the biblically and theologically astute saints in the congregation talking about Jubilee, that every 50-year event described in Leviticus 25, when property was returned to the original owners. I remember the comment accompanied by something approaching a smirk, “Well, that didn’t work!” The clear point was that what works, obviously, is the permanent accumulation of private property, and consequently Jubilee was dismissed wholesale.

I am appealing for is not to dismiss Jubilee thinking. I am appealing for us to consider Jubilee-themed thinking and behaving

regarding economics. (I’m using the phrase “Jubilee-themed,” so we do not get fixated on an end product, and refuse to think about working toward the substance of Jubilee truth in a world that is larger than agricultural.) I am appealing to professors of economics at Christian universities across the country to invite their students to think seriously about how the themes of Jubilee might inform our thinking as individuals, families, communities, cities, and nations regarding matters of property ownership. I am appealing to younger generations to allow the themes of Jubilee to inform their thinking about how they will teach their children about matters economic. I am appealing to board members of foundations to allow Jubilee-themed thinking to inform the decision-making of the foundation.

Again, it is not a good idea to outright disregard scripture, nor is it a good idea to defer to “after Jesus returns” those things that seem to be impossible to put into practice now. For example, the “peace position” of the Brethren in Christ Church is not unworkable. One of these days the military is going to shift its remarkable logistical power to food production, because we have learned to settle disputes via the wisdom of God. (Isaiah 2:4) What is needed is some robust, courageous conversations in our universities, small groups, city governments, pastors’ conferences, blogs, and talk shows about this world working properly, like Jesus teaches us to pray. We need that same courageous thinking regarding economics.

Here is Leviticus 25:23-24, a portion of the Jubilee teaching of the entire chapter:

The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers. Throughout the land that you hold as a possession, you must provide for the redemption of the land.

Think with me about not owning land permanently. Think with me about taking the mindset and identity of a foreigner and stranger. Think with me about providing for the redemption of the land.

First, in Jubilee-themed living (Isaiah 65:17-25) everyone will build houses and dwell in them; they will not build houses and others live in them. It is not unusual to bequeath land/houses to children/relatives, or perhaps causes. If we have the mindset, however, that we “own” property for a season, how could the scriptural exhortation that no one owns land permanently begin to seed our thinking so that everyone can own property?

Two, far from the ubiquitous and entrenched perspective of aspiring to be an insider in a country, Jubilee-themed living surprisingly asks us to take on the mindset and identity of a foreigner and a stranger. Even if we “own” property, our self-image is to be of someone who is renting, who is not part of the insiders of the community, not part of the ones in power. Our self-image is to be that we are new, visitors, ones not privy to advantage. How could the scriptural exhortation that we reside in the Lord’s land as foreigners and strangers begin to seed our thinking to be creative in extending welcome and advantage and opportunity to all?

Three, in Jubilee-themed living we are not so much owning “the land,” as we are redeeming the land. In Jubilee-themed living, permanent selling of land is not the norm; rather, land has value in terms of its use for persons for a period of time. Providing for the redemption of the land and clearing it by payment (as in redeeming a mortgage) involves thinking about how land and property can be made available to everyone: “Throughout the land that you hold as a possession, you must provide for the redemption of the land” (Lev. 25:24).

All of us can appreciate just how difficult and foreign the Jubilee concept appears. But could we consider Jubilee-themed economics? How can Jubilee-themed economics inform our imaginations, our community building codes, our “uncomfortability,” with persons being permanent renters? Might Jubilee-themed economics open the way for creative thinking in the face of permanent debt for individuals, for countries?



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Remember, according to Leviticus 25, we are not permanent landowners; rather, we use the land while we need it, but then, because it belongs to the Lord, it is to go back to others. Which others? All others! Remember, we are foreigners and strangers, not insiders. Remember, we are charged with redeeming the land, clearing the way for everyone to return to their own property (Lev. 25:13).

Jubilee-themed economics. Could it be? Could the world know the celebration, the jubilation, of jubilee? Yes! Let's not refuse

the entirety of Jubilee because we are certain Leviticus 25 is impossible to come to pass. Fellow foreigners, let's think together in Jubilee-themed ways. Let's talk together. Let's risk together. Truly, the land is the Lord's.

Here are some questions that I believe we must be thinking about:

1. Imagine/develop an economic system wherein land can be owned for 50 years and then. . . ? Let's not make the difficulty of answering the question stop us from talking and thinking.
2. How does taking on the identity of a for-

eigner inform our economic assumptions?

3. What are the implications of redeeming land so that it is available to the next owner, unencumbered by any obligations?

Lynn Thrush is bishop of the Great Lakes Conference of Brethren in Christ US.

How Is Our Plumb Line?

By Jennifer Lancaster

LOVE OF GOD and love of neighbor are binding and essential principles in our faith. This was the primary message I was hoping that folks heard during my July 2021 sermon in my local church. The assigned lectionary text for the week came from Amos 7—the third of three visions Amos had received from God regarding the status of the people in Israel. This third vision, of a plumb line showing a wall built askew, is an apt image for understanding justice in God's kingdom.

Let me first sketch what is happening in the broader biblical narrative at the time. The story of Amos takes place in the mid-eighth century (BCE). So, long gone are the days of a united kingdom under leadership of Kings David and Solomon. Rather, the kingdom is split in two: Judah in the south and the northern kingdom of Israel. Amos's story is set in the northern kingdom's city of Bethel, a city currently experiencing peace and prosperity, yet also extreme social stratification. Amos arrives from Judah and begins to prophesy against the ways Israel has been exploiting its people. In fact, both the political and religious establishments come under fire in the book.

First, politics. The king, Jeroboam II, has allowed Israelites to be sold into debt slavery, creating large gaps between rich and poor. This growing economic inequality was primarily the result of extending survival loans to peasant farmers experiencing a particularly bad season. Old Testament scholars

claim that these loans stood in opposition to Jewish social and cultural norms, thus extending the cycle of poverty as farmers slowly lost their land holdings.

Next, religion. The Northern Kingdom had built new temples and acquired dozens of new idols. Amos accuses the religious elite of hypocrisy for failing to participate in true worship. They fail to “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24). In short, the people of Israel had broken their status of being Yahweh's covenantal people. In the first six chapters of the book, Amos details these shortcomings and predicts the destruction of Israel. They had become complacent, a nation abounding in injustice, despite their knowledge of God's law. So, starting in chapter 7, Amos reveals a series of visions he has received from God:

This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. And the Lord said to me, “Amos, what do you see?” And I said, “A plumb line.” Then the Lord said, “See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by; the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.”

Many commentators agree that the plumb line metaphor expresses how the Israelites are out of line with God. Moreover,

due to this misalignment, Amos proclaims that judgment is impending and walls, both literal and figurative, will crumble. One theme in the book of Amos is to show how justice, which is for all, leads to life, while injustice leads to death. Amos shows what injustice looks like by using this image of a wall, built askew, displaying its physical distortion, to represent how the people of Israel are, like the wall, out of line. But, how important is it, really, to build a straight wall? Very.

A number of years ago my husband came home from work in a frustrated mood. He designs warehouses for a living, and I asked him why he was so stressed. He responded with a long-winded explanation about the aisles being too narrow. After some additional probing, I discovered that in his current warehouse design the tolerance was too tight for a fork-lift truck to drive down the aisle and make a 90-degree turn to deliver a pallet on a rack. Tolerance is how far off you can be, plus or minus, on either side of a measurement and still stay within the maximum allowed variation. “How far off are you?” I ask. “Oh, an inch,” he replies. I giggled. To me it sounded silly that he was losing sleep over an inch! The week wore on and the design improved. In the end, the fork lift finally was able to make its turn, and I learned that tolerance is very important. Otherwise, the whole thing doesn't work. Likewise, for Amos, when a wall is out of plumb, it cannot stand for long.

So why did Amos need to receive a vision from God to communicate this truth? Because the people were utterly clueless as to their transgression. Amid the peace, prestige and seemingly devout religiosity in the northern kingdom at the time, the people had lost their interconnectedness to humanity as well as their connection to creation. It was replaced by political and religious authorities who focused on military conquest, generating wealth, and idol worship. They had lost sight of love of God and love of neighbor. Lack of righteousness and integrity had created a situation beyond repair. As Walter Brueggemann would say, the “covenantal neighborliness” that set apart the Israelite nation back in the book of Exodus had dissolved into self-interest of the elite and exploitation of the poor.

As you might imagine, Amos’s vision of a plumb line is not well received in Bethel. One could argue that it would not be well received by many Americans today, too. However, it is not a difficult leap to make to replace Israel with our own history of economic misuse. Parallels abound. Income gaps between rich and poor are at unprecedented highs, more than doubling between 1989 and 2016.¹ The dominant economic narrative continues to uphold its own power and authority despite injustice glaring it in the face.

For Amos to be the one bringing the vision of the plumb line to Israel is a difficult task. Ultimately, it threatens that very narrative and the people who uphold it. In the case of Amos (in chapter 7), it’s the priest Amaziah who must face Amos’s challenging words:

Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, “Amos has conspired against you in the very center of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. For thus Amos has said, ‘Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.’” And Amaziah said to Amos, “O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom. Then Amos answered Amaziah, “I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son; but I am a herdsman, and

a dresser of sycamore trees, and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, ‘Go prophesy to my people Israel.’”

It is clear that Amos is a threat to Amaziah—not just to him personally as priest but to everything that connects Amaziah, the priesthood, organized religion, and the king. This is obvious because as soon as he can, Amaziah reports to Jeroboam the treasonous words of the prophet. Commentator Douglas King tells us that when he, Amaziah, feels threatened by Amos’s words, he turns to the king, quickly and fully relying on the power structure that has served him so well.² I wonder how we rely on similar structures and what consequences might exist by doing so. Are our actions, our economic choices, essentially perpetuating the cycle of inequality?

As scornful as Amaziah is in his verbal assault on Amos, Amos’s response is firmly grounded in his adherence to God’s law and his commitment to covenant. His authority to prophesy comes directly from God. The prophetic message he sets out to deliver rests wholly in where he places its authority. King’s commentary continues, saying “when we accept human systems as possessors of ultimate authority, we are living a lie.”³ Amos brought to light Amaziah’s lie.

In the end, the simple image of a plumb line against a crooked wall sends a powerful message to a crumbling nation. Crippled by the negative consequences of its economic success and misaligned by its religious idolatry, Amos attempts to re-center the people of Israel to right relationship with one another and with Yahweh.

How can we, today, work to build community—in our homes, churches, state, and nation in such a way that we honor Yahweh’s desire for us to live as his covenantal people? Perhaps we can read this story of the plumb line knowing that it is a critical tool, one that can both critique and affirm our relationship with God and others. Of us it demands righteous acts.

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where they attend the Lancaster Brethren in Christ Church. This article is adapted from a sermon she preached there this summer.

Notes:

¹Katherine Schaeffer, “Six facts about economic inequality in the U.S. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/02/07/6-facts-about-economic-inequality-in-the-u-s/>.

²Douglas King, *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 3* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 221.

³King, 223,

“Yahweh will be found, first and foremost, with those who are oppressed, enslaved, and suffering—at the bottom of society—rather than with the powerful and mighty (such as Pharaoh). . . . We have too often been conformed to the Pharaonic empire and its ways.”

(*Missional Economics*, by Michael Barram).

“The Bible seeks to transform our moral imaginations so that we will reason economically from the perspective of abundance and gratitude as opposed to scarcity and fear.”

(*Missional Economics*, by Michael Barram).

Increasing Opportunity for Nigerian Women and Youth

By Mike Strathdee

NIGERIA IS ONE is one of the larger and wealthier nations in Africa. But economic opportunity is varied and unevenly distributed. Average income of \$416US per month is more than a dozen times higher than what many rural farm families subsist on.

Just under half of Nigeria's 201 million citizens live in rural areas. The poverty rate (families earning less than \$1US a day) among that group is 47.3 percent. Northern regions of the country have higher unemployment, greater economic and gender inequality and outbreaks of violent conflict.

MEDA's youth entrepreneurship and women's empowerment in northern Nigeria (WAY) project aims to increase the contribution by entrepreneurs and small-scale businesses, particularly those run by women and youth, to Nigeria's economic growth. Lack of access to infrastructure, mobility and finance have been barriers to women's participation in business.

The five-year effort, funded by Global Affairs Canada and contributions from individual MEDA supporters, targets businesses in Bauchi State's processing sector and food industry. It focuses specifically on three main value chains: rice, peanuts and soybeans.

The project aims to improve business performance, enhance the business environment for women and youth, and strengthen community and family support to decrease the risk of early and forced girl child marriage.

Bauchi State is the gateway of the Boko Haram insurgency. Boko Haram, often translated to mean "Western education is forbidden," began an armed rebellion against Nigeria's government in 2009.

Many women whose husbands have been killed in the conflict fled to Bauchi, which had a major impact on the region's economy, said Grace Fosen, MEDA's country director for the Nigeria Way project.

The project has surpassed its target of reaching 16,000 women and youth entrepre-

neurs working in the soybean, rice and peanut agriculture value chains, with a year remaining. By this spring, the WAY program had worked with over 17,000 entrepreneurs. On a related goal of working with 523



Adama and her spouse Mallam Jibrin wash paddy rice to prepare it for parboiling.

women sales agents, the project has engaged 498 to date.

Savings and loan groups—people who meet regularly to pool savings, make loans and learn new skills to overcome issues that limit them from having or growing a business—have worked well as an entry point, says Grace Fosen, MEDA's country director for the Nigeria Way project. "That gave these women the ability to save a little . . . to give themselves loans."

The groups help provide financing for people who have found it difficult to engage with financial institutions, empowering them to put more money into their businesses. Women in 200 groups across seven different areas have accumulated 121 million Nigerian Naira (\$314,600 US).

Introducing new technology to improve processing techniques and stimulating business innovation are important elements of the project. Assistance to purchase rice parboiling equipment and other technologies have helped women enjoy greater success in the market due to the higher quality of their product. Climate smart technology has also saved both time and drudgery.

A traditional parboiling technique took a week to process one bag of rice and resulted in substandard quality. A system that in-

volves steaming the rice instead of boiling it processes two bags in two hours, with improved quality and reduced consumption of water and oil.

Improved cooking systems are also being introduced through the project. An estimated 95,000 Nigerian women die annually due to indoor gas pollution. Use of locally produced briquettes that do not smoke inside the house produce a more sustainable fuel source.

Increased business success and higher family incomes have led to improved communication and household decision making, with husbands assisting with household chores and helping their wives market their production.

Mike Strathdee is publications editor in the marketing and communication department at MEDA. This article is reprinted by permission from the July/August 2021 edition of The Marketplace.

What is MEDA?

For nearly 70 years, MEDA (formerly Mennonite Economic Development Association) has been creating business solutions to poverty, guided by the vision that all people may unleash their God-given potential to earn a livelihood, provide for families and enrich communities. Decent work delivers a fair income, security, prospects for personal development, freedom to express concerns, and equality of opportunity for women and men. Using the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as our guide, MEDA is working to eliminate poverty and advance equality by aligning our goals with six of the SDGs: no poverty, zero hunger, gender equality, decent work and economic growth, climate action, and partnerships for the goals. More information about where MEDA works is at www.meda.org/where-we-work/.

Do Good. Make Money. Empower Others.

By Luke Embree

THERE IS AN abundance of grace and goodness in our world. Any Christian discussion of economic justice must begin from this point, because if it was not for the abundance of grace and goodness in our world, established through the ongoing involvement of a compassionate God, we would have no basis from which to begin our critique of economic injustice. God's grace and goodness are distributed equally and are accessible to all in infinite abundance.

There is also an abundance of wealth in our world. However, unlike God's grace, the world's wealth is not distributed equally or equitably, which is to say according to what each person needs or deserves. Analysis of Forbes's most recent data on the wealth of the 719 billionaires in the US reveals that their collective wealth has increased 55 percent since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. These 719 individuals now collectively hold more wealth than the bottom 50 percent of the American people.¹ Together, 719 individuals hold more wealth than roughly 165 million people. Such a disparity is worse than obscene; it's sinful.

I've come to the realistic if somewhat depressing conclusion that there's really nothing I can do about that. I don't believe God is calling me to do something for or against the 719 US billionaires and I realistically can't do much for the 165 million people who deserve a greater slice of the economic pie. But I can do something for Lydia and Mary, and I hope one day I can do something for people like Ericka.

As part of our ministry, some friends and I have recently developed a business with a very simple set of values: Do Good. Make Money. Empower Others. With a fourth imperative, it becomes our mission statement: Do Good. Make Money. Empower Others. Repeat. I'll explain.

Having planted a church, I've come into contact with many wonderful people who are often overlooked or effectively pushed toward the margins, like Lydia. Lydia is a Congolese refugee with an active family and a radiant smile. In addition to working and

raising her family, she's studying to obtain her GED. People like Lydia, unfamiliar with American culture and bearing an unfamiliar accent, are often relegated to minimum wage jobs. Worse still, they're sometimes exploited.

One of the objectives of our business is to provide livable wages (currently in the range of \$15/hour) for people like Lydia. Our business is able to employ people to serve the needs of offices and financial institutions like banks, thus creating a safe environment for them to learn, grow, and make a living. Even better, we are able to partner with other organizations whose mission is to do the same, like the one led by Mary.

Mary is the director of Kentucky Refugee Ministries (KRM), a nonprofit that cares for and equips refugees coming to America. Mary's team provides numerous services, including housing assistance, language classes, and legal aid. They also partner with small businesses to help their clients obtain good jobs. We're grateful to be able to partner with KRM and, over the coming months and years, we look forward to growing our relationship with the ones they serve.

As the company grows, we intend to delegate much of its operations to our employees and partners. Through the creation of systems and processes, we are able to train, empower, and delegate responsibilities to others, thus creating a company that can be managed on the basis of 15-20 hours a week. This frees people like me to serve the Lord through pastoral ministry while receiving a semi-passive income. I want to replicate this model as a solution to financing church plants and other ministries, empowering people who want to do good in their city, like Ericka.

Ericka is a Brethren in Christ church planter and pastor. She's an extremely capable young woman and would be successful at anything she put her mind to. What is she putting her mind to doing? Ericka moved from her home in Arizona to Allentown, PA to plant a church and care for her neighbors, many of whom are, in fact, the ones our so-

ciety esteems the least.

We all know that no one gets into church planting to make money. In truth, the types of people who plant churches typically accept that they will make far less money, work far more hours, and bear far more burden, worry, and frustration than the average occupation. They do it because they love Jesus and they love people. Period.

In my humble opinion, these are the people we should be showering with finances, precisely because they are freely dispensing God's goodness and grace in our world with little regard for themselves. At the very least, we should provide them with 401ks, health insurance, and livable salaries. And it's not

"[F]rom a divine perspective, economically depressed and marginalized lives matter. This does not deny the fact that all lives matter. God loves everyone, and all lives do matter. Nevertheless, those who suffer economically at the hands of individuals and systems of power must, from God's perspective, be acknowledged, valued, vindicated, supported, and restored."

(*Missional Economics*, by Michael Barram).

just church planters. There are myriad ways people like Ericka love and serve their communities full time, often earning near or below poverty compensation. Considering the amount of wealth collectively held by the people of God, this too is sinful.

I hope that the business we have started may serve to aid, support, and empower others in their pursuit of God's "kingdom on earth as in heaven." We hope it might become a productive model that can be repli-

cated, helping many more Lydias, Marys, and Erickas in our world. We hope that it may advance the broader conversation of realizing economic justice for all by establishing stable provision for those who devote themselves to doing good in their communities. Through the empowerment of employees like Lydia and partnerships with leaders like Mary, we hope to create semi-passive sources

of income for families like Ericka's. It is certainly not the solution to wealth disparity in our world, but it is an active participation in the good that is given to us by God. In its own small way, it is generating and distributing wealth in exactly the right places.

Note:

¹Chuck Collins, "Updates: Billionaire Profits, U.S.

Job Losses, and Pandemic Profiteers," Inequality.Org., Institute for Policy Studies, July 14, 2021, <https://inequality.org/great-divide/updates-billionaire-pandemic/>.

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A Journey of Bold Listening

By Anna Vogt

A WISE MENTOR once told me that advocacy means listening boldly. To advocate means building relationships and paying attention to stories and what they tell us about the connections and responsibilities we share with one another. And, over the years, I've found advocacy to be a life-giving spiritual discipline. It's rooted in the biblical stories of people like Esther. It's based on choosing to believe in the possibility of change, on listening out of a place of connection and on working together.

I spent many of my growing up years in the beautiful Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in territory in Dawson City, Yukon. It's a place of complexity and history, of small towns and close relationships, of settler and Indigenous cultures, of gold mining and breathtaking landscapes. It's a place where I first started thinking about the histories that we share as I learned more about my own Russian Mennonite family's journey and how to be a good guest on northern land.

After university, where I had studied grassroots nonviolent movements, joining MCC's two-year Seed program for young adults felt like a natural step. The program's focus on living and walking alongside churches engaging in peacebuilding meant that I had the opportunity to live and work in Mampuján, Colombia, from 2011-2013.

Members of this Afro-Colombian community are among the nearly seven million people who have been displaced inside Colombia by decades of armed conflict. Although very different from the Yukon, it is also a place of complexity, of conflict, of close relationships, of colonization, of harm and of healing.

Supported by MCC partner Sembradopaz, whose Spanish name means planting peace, the women of the community en-

ers, also started telling another story—of community resilience and hope, of forgiveness and breaking cycles of violence, of working for reparations and dignity through advocacy.

As I attended meetings and advocacy events alongside community leaders like Juana Alicia Ruíz Hernández, I saw how hope, prophetically linked to action, grew out of their belief in a God of restoration and love who calls people to engage together in nonviolence. Near the end of my time in Mampuján, I had the great joy of watching some community members receive their first reparations payments from the government. I was inspired by the change that could take place when people gathered to share their stories and then act together.

For churches across Colombia, including in Mampuján, this work of building peace and healing was often messy and complicated. Not everyone agreed with each other. The very real risk of retaliation from armed groups was always present. However, the goal of shalom—of peace with justice, grounded in theology—brought people together in polarized contexts in a way that political ideologies could not.

After my time in the Seed program, I moved to Bogotá, Colombia's capital, where I continued to serve with MCC. During my time there, the Colombian government and the largest armed group, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC; Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), engaged in peace dialogues. During a time of debate nationwide, many Colombian churches and MCC part-



In 2010, Mampuján community leader Juana Alicia Ruíz Hernández displays a partially completed 10-year historic quilt project in Colombia celebrating the Mampuján community's past before they were displaced by a paramilitary group in 2000. The quilt recreates the layout of Mampuján Viejo. (MCC photo/Silas Crews)

gaged in trauma healing through quilting their stories. As they sewed, they shared what had happened to them over 500 years of history. They stitched their ancestors being brought as slaves to Colombia, their displacement by armed groups and their dreams of a future free of violence.

They, along with other community lead-



ners brought that same message of peace for everyone to their congregations. Some, like MCC partner Justapaz, whose name combines the Spanish words for justice and peace, engaged in direct advocacy to the negotiating parties.

The story of Esther was often used as a reference point. In times such as these, what is the role of the church? Just as Esther was uniquely positioned to speak to the king, how was the church called to respond to contexts of violence and uncertainty?

This public commitment to peace is not just for times of celebration, or when efforts seem likely to bear fruit. In 2016, when the government and the FARC were ready to sign a peace agreement, the last step was the referendum for Colombians to vote on the agreement. Instead of the resounding yes vote we expected, many of those who had not experienced conflict, including many in churches in urban areas, voted no. The peace agreement was in jeopardy. The peace churches' public witness was essential.

After the vote, faith leaders, including Anabaptists, gathered in the central plaza of Bogotá, publicly recommitting to the work of peace. We celebrated communion, breaking bread together. It was a moment of confession and renewal, based on the relationships we shared with those directly

impacted by violence. Years of listening were transformed into a bold public witness.

The opportunity to work with the global church, and to witness these powerful examples of love in action through advocacy, has shaped my own understanding of faith and of my faith calling. This work isn't easy. It can be deeply painful to be confronted with situations of violence and injustice and asked to examine my own responsibility. Yet we are not alone.

As I stood with my colleagues from Justapaz, among many others, in the square in Bogotá, it was another chance to experience the power of being willing to sit with discomfort and grief and of the public witness of sharing bread with one another. In these spaces of walking together and sharing joys and sorrows, I found a sense of hope.

Within many Christian traditions, there is a long history of paying attention to the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit. When I talk with community leaders like Juana Alicia or am in planning meetings, I often sense that I am hearing that still, small voice.

Here in Ottawa, a world away from the Yukon and from Colombia, I have a tapestry from Mampuján hanging in my office. When I look at it, I am reminded that I am sewn into the community story, and that the community and my time in Latin America also

are stitched deeply into my own story.

I continue to reflect on the lessons of Esther. When are we asked to be Esther and when are we called to examine if we are the ones who are being invited to listen and respond to the voices of the Esthers in our own contexts? What does bold listening look like here?

In our advocacy work, in Canada and the U.S., we build bridges between government decision makers and MCC partners. We strive to encourage government policies that recognize the connections that we share with one another, that uphold dignity and peace and that undo harm.

Together, we continue to imagine different futures of repair and restoration. As we do this work, my own faith continues to be shaped and my understandings of justice, mercy and love are renewed and re-imagined. Daily, I am privileged to witness and learn from the power of faith communities around the world and in Canada, as we gather to share stories, listen deeply and take the next step boldly, based on the relationships we share with one another.

Anna Vogt is director of MCC Canada's Peace and Justice Office in Ottawa, ON. She served with MCC and was based in Colombia from 2011 to 2018. Mennonite Central Committee US article, used with

The Sound of God's Justice

By Zach Spidel

WE INVOKE THE term “justice” so frequently today, and are so deeply divided about it, that I believe it's important to start this column by laying out my understanding of the biblical significance of that word. Justice, in the Hebrew of the Old Testament (*sedaqa/mispat*), does not have the same narrowly judicial connotations that the people of the English-speaking world have inherited from the Latin cognate term (*iustitia*) which lies behind our own verbiage. Justice, beginning in the Old Testament and very much continuing into the New, is not about people receiving their “just rewards” according to some prior set of standards or stipulations. Rather, justice is doing what is needed to establish or restore wholesome and holy rela-

tionship between people under God. Very often what is just—what is needed to restore right relationship—turns out to be the showing of mercy, the offering of forgiveness, and the giving of what has not been earned but what is, nevertheless, needed by another.

One of the many places where this biblical vision of justice is revealed in all its startling beauty is Isaiah 30. The chapter begins with a wail: “Oh, rebellious children, says the Lord, who carry out a plan, but not mine; who make an alliance, but against my will, adding sin to sin. . . .” For 17 verses, the prophet proclaims to the people the terrible depths of their own depravity. In one of the most striking images of the passage, God through Isaiah says, “this iniquity shall be-



come for you like a break in a high wall, bulging out, and about to collapse, whose crash comes suddenly, in an instant. . . .” The prophecy goes on to emphasize the people's stubborn commitment to their sin despite the wall bulging above their heads under the weight of all that wickedness. Just as this terrible crescendo appears to reach its climax—just as we with our fallen notions of what is just and fair expect God to bring down the proverbial hammer—we hear this: “There-

fore, the LORD waits to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show mercy to you. For the LORD is a God of justice (mispat); blessed are all those who wait for him.”

That initial “therefore” is a real shocker, isn’t it? Not in spite of the people’s commitment to rebellion, but because of it, or, at least, in view of it, God’s response is to wait them out. He is determined to show them a mercy they keep rebuffing. Thank God that his determination is always greater than our own! Notice, as well, that for Isaiah there is no tension between this determination to show mercy and the idea that God is just. In fact, Isaiah says it is because God is just that he is determined to show mercy. If justice is simply a commitment to restore shalom—to re-establish whole and wholesome webs of relationship—then this makes all the sense in the world. For mercy restores where retribution (“you get what you deserve/earn”) leads so often to small-minded, small-hearted resentments and the further breakdown of community.

Biblical passages along these lines could be multiplied many times over. For instance, Psalm 116, in a typical instance of Hebrew parallelism, praises God in this way: “Gracious is the LORD, and just; yes, our God is compassionate!” But let’s move on to a text that uses economic imagery to teach spiritual truths that will, in return, transform our economic lives if fully embraced.

The parable of the laborers in the vine-

yard (Matthew 20:1-16) is a profound and profoundly important text for our topic. Jesus teaches that God does not reward us in a measure strictly commensurate with what we have, by some tabulation, “earned.” Rather, he gives to us each what we need each day, even if some of us have served much more or less than others. God’s generosity offends some who do not feel grateful for the pay they were promised but angry that others who did less than them have received the same reward. Despite their anger, the God-figure in Jesus’s parable is resolute in his decision to pay out to each worker, however much they worked, enough for them to eat that day. This is *sedaqa* in action. This is what God considers just, even if it goes against our preferred notions.

If this is how God is with spiritual treasures, how much quicker should we be to imitate our heavenly Father in this practice with mere earthly goods? What if Christian business people did not pay their workers the lowest wage the market will bear, but the highest amount they could possibly afford? And what if they paid not according to the tabulations of the world, which value the consultant’s expertise at \$150 dollars an hour and the janitor’s at \$9.50, but according to their worth of each person before God? What would that mean and what would that look like? How could it be done? Are we willing to honestly ask such questions? To earnestly implement whatever frail and par-

tial answers we come to?

What if, anytime you hired a contractor to work on your home or were served by a waiter, you determined to tip them extravagantly? What if your tip was more extravagant the more you suspected the person working for you might have little economic cushion?. What if that was your sole concern in tabulating tips, rather than any attempt to reward better service with more money? What if you left a very rude waiter a very large tip because they were rude and, therefore, clearly not having a very good day?

What if, when you bought a house, you chose to live in one whose size, features, and neighborhood were well below your means so that you could give more generously to others? What if even that question, along with all these others, was just the beginning of a Christian rethinking of economics? I have been asking myself these questions for the last 10 years at least. They remain exciting to me because I believe they are driven, as if by a drumbeat, by the justice of God. The sound of the song of God’s justice is enough, now even as it was in the days of the psalmists and prophets, to make a person want to dance for joy.

Zach Spidel is pastor of The Shepherd’s Table, Dayton, OH.

Breaking from Cultural Expectations

By Rand Williamson

AT ITS CORE, the question of what role the Church should play in addressing social inequality is part of a larger question about how and if the Church should approach politics generally. Questions about distribution and redistribution of resources, about political economy, cut to the foundation of political institutions and the ideologies that they promote as “truth,” and they can make you enemies pretty quickly. It makes sense then that many in the Beloved Community might find these questions distasteful and want to avoid them all together in favor of concerns considered more tradi-

tionally spiritual.

In this article, I want to argue that this drive away from politics is ill-advised and essentially amounts to a retreat from our responsibilities as members of the Beloved Community. We currently live in a country where only five percent of the population controls around 60 percent of all the wealth, where billionaires travel to space while millions of Americans are facing the very real prospect of eviction and living on the streets. Basically, we live in a society sick with social inequality, and this sickness affects the Church directly because it’s made up of peo-

ple who suffer the symptoms of this sickness. It is time to start asking some hard questions about what our role in this sickness is, because we will play one for good or for ill.

When looking back at our tradition as members of the Beloved Community of God, we see that there has always been a concern with material inequality and a realization that justice on the material dimension is connected to spiritual health. One example of this, which has recently become popular due to Christian political projects such as the Poor People’s Campaign, is the practice of Jubilee outlined in the book of Leviticus. Dur-

ing the year of Jubilee, slaves are freed and those who have fallen on hard times are restored to their ancestral properties. It serves as a kind of reset that allows for continued community cohesion. This cohesion is compromised by inequality and the development of materially defined classes in society. It is an acknowledgement that, in reality, God owns everything and a way to “proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants.” This was an act designed to promote profound freedom not based on superficial things like a variety of consumer choices or a certain allotment of leisure time but on the absence of exploitation and coercion.

Later on, in the book of Acts, we see that the Beloved Community has advanced these ideas beyond even the edicts laid down in Leviticus. Of our community, it is said “no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.” This style of life makes Jubilee obsolete. Early Church leaders gave their harshest criticisms to those who benefited from social inequality. The epistle of James is noteworthy on this topic when it says “Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the righteous one, who does not resist you.” Especially relevant to our current situation is James’s realization that social inequality is the result of theft and fraud. He saw the existence of inequality, which caused members of his community to suffer, as an offense to God himself.

Up to this point, I have been highlighting why we should care enough to act on this issue and shining light on the fact that the prophetic tradition of the Beloved Community has always been engaged in the fight against social inequality right from its inception. Where does this leave us today? How do we carry on this tradition of creating space for transformation in a world that seems more locked down than ever?

One thing we must realize is that the kind of inequality that exists in the US is a recipe for unrest, and it will result in an increasing number of crises and political up-

heavals. On our current trajectory, we will have to learn to navigate an increasingly tumultuous landscape as a community while holding onto the integrity of the way of Jesus Christ. One figure who might help us navigate this narrow and tricky path is the late Oscar Romero who, during his time as a Church leader, faced tremendous political repression in his native country of El Salvador. In his letter, “The Church and Popular Political Organizations,”¹ he lays out some wisdom that could benefit our search for a middle way in the US today.

Brother Romero, early in his letter, affirms the Church’s role in the political struggles of the time: “It is, however, our honest intention to dispel the inertia of the many Salvadorans who are indifferent to the suffering in our land. . . .” He compels us to think about how we would answer the question God put to Cain in Genesis 4:10: “What have you done? Listen to the sound of your brother’s blood crying out to me from the ground.” To Romero, the Church as a community which inherently wields power had a key role to play in defending the dignity of those who wished to organize politically. Romero also cautions us saying that “Christians with a political vocation should strive to achieve a synthesis between their Christian faith and their political activity, but without identifying them. Faith ought to inspire political action but not be mistaken for it.”

In the end, we must have faith that God will reveal our path forward, and when it is revealed, we must summon up the courage to break from the conformist expectations of our culture and follow that path. In the past, our Beloved Community was able to more fully live out the ideals of equality, and taking more seriously how we can replicate the communities described in Acts might be a good step forward. While this is a more internal approach, it is not apolitical. In fact, few things are as threatening to a system as sincerely and openly modeling alternatives to it. Building these communities, and expanding them, would become controversial if we could do it successfully. We cannot, however, allow this to deter us. Our Father’s work is the work of transformation on every level from the singular to the global, and we need to be about our Father’s work.

Rand Williamson is a long-time Philadelphia resident and a member of Circle of Hope’s South Broad Street congregation. Over the last year and a half, he has been leading the Circle of Peacemakers compassion team there and is active in other grassroots organizations such as Reclaim Philadelphia. He currently works in neuroscience research and is preparing to do a PsyD in neuropsychology. Check out his other writing at <https://peacemaker.design.blog/> or email him at randw87@gmail.com.

Note:

¹The Church and Popular Political Organizations: Third Pastoral Letter of Archbishop Romero,” Feast of the Transfiguration, August 6, 1978, <http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/sites/default/files/thirdpastoralletter.pdf>. Accessed August 20, 2021.

“The North American church has tended to operate from the perspective of cultural, economic, and political privilege, which has resulted, all too often, in a cozy relationship with the priorities, forces, and structures that reflect worldly power and wealth more than the kind of communal economy of generosity and abundance that Jesus seems to be advocating in this passage” [the rich young ruler, Mark 10:17-31].

(Missional Economics, by Michael Barram).

“Productivity is one of the most deeply engrained values and priorities in North American culture, and, in my experience, that is often no less true in churches.”

(Missional Economics, by Michael Barram).

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to help each other within the abundance supplied to the whole nation to help each individual within the nation. Those with more should help those in need and this is more than a condescending noblesse oblige. It is a matter of God's calling for a truly communal and relational life, including economically.

Barram rightly sees ancient Israel as a covenant community with known expectations between God and his chosen people. But he also sees the church as a covenant community. We too are "to 'seek justice' in a covenantal context [fostering] a holistic community of interdependent relationships in which all, including the most vulnerable, flourish consistently." Barram asserts that God's economic concerns are consistent throughout the old and new covenants.

Like the Hebrew scriptures, the New Testament is full of economic concerns. Jesus reads the famous Isaiah passage in the Nazareth synagogue proclaiming "good news to the poor." We see the effect of wealth on the rich young ruler. We see Zacchaeus's salvation translating into economic restoration and justice for those he cheated. We know we are to "consider the lilies," that we can't "serve two masters," that we are to "store up treasure in heaven" not on earth. In Acts we see the covenantal community of the church feeding the widows and sharing re-

sources with those in need. We see sister churches taking up collections to help the church in Jerusalem and other acts based on God's abundance and not a fear of scarcity. Reading the New Testament with a purposeful eye towards economic realities and teachings yields lessons that should inform our own economic understanding and practices.

The call to follow God is a call on the totality of our lives. Understanding and practicing a God-centered approach to our economic lives is not tangential, but fully incorporated in how we live and become missional in our witness to the world. In God's economics, it is not only a matter of our individual choices but also the way the covenantal community, the church, works within God's "divine abundance" and rejects "the idolatries of traditional human economic reasoning." We need to be transformed by the renewing of our minds and *Missional Economics* is a well-reasoned theological work that is accessible to readers both familiar and new to the topic. May we be open to the Spirit leading us into truth as we read, study, and practice the Word together.

Lois Saylor attends the Harrisburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church and serves on the Shalom! editorial committee.

Editor's Notes

Subscription renewals and contributions:

Many of you have responded to the 2021 subscription renewal letter. Thank you so much. If you haven't contributed yet, you can do so now. The annual subscription rate is \$20, and we welcome additional contributions. Checks should be payable to Brethren in Christ US and sent to the editor (address on page 2), or renew online at bicus.org/resources/publications/shalom/.

Final topic for 2021 and looking ahead:

If all goes well, the fall edition will feature stories from the global Brethren in Christ Church. Please contact the editor if you know Brethren in Christ people in other countries who might have a story to share about how their church is working with the ten core values, especially serving compassionately and pursuing peace. In the meantime, I welcome your ideas for topics and writers for 2022.

Wealth and Income Inequality

From *Inequality.org*

Wealth

- The world's richest one percent, those with more than \$1 million, own 43.4 percent of the world's wealth. Adults with less than \$10,000 in wealth make up 53.6 percent of the world's population but hold just 1.4 percent of global wealth. Individuals owning over \$100,000 in assets make up 12.4 percent of the global population but own 83.9 percent of global wealth.
- The share of national income going to the richest one percent has increased rapidly in North America (United States and Canada), China, India, and Russia

and more moderately in Europe.

- The combined wealth of all US billionaires increased by 59.8 percent between March 18, 2020 and July 9, 2021, from approximately \$2.947 trillion to \$4.711 trillion. Of the more than 700 US billionaires, the richest five saw a 113 percent increase in their combined wealth during this period.

Income

- America's top 10 percent average more than nine times as much income as the bottom 90 percent. Americans in the top 1 percent average over 39 times more income than the bottom 90 per-

cent. Americans in the top 0.1 percent take in over 196 times the income of the bottom 90 percent.

- As of the second quarter of 2021, the median white worker made 26 percent more than the typical black worker and around 30 percent more than the median Latino worker.
- The median white family has 41 times more wealth than the median black family and 22 times more wealth than the median Latino family.

Inequality.org is a project of the Institute for Policy Studies and aims to provide information and insights for readers ranging from educators and journalists to activists and policy makers. The statistics here come from the "Facts" section of the website where the original sources are cited in full.

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BOOK REVIEW

Lessons in Abundance, Scarcity, and the Covenantal Community

By Lois Saylor

Be not conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds (Romans 12:2).

AS BELIEVERS WE may very well embrace the scriptural verses of transformation. We long to disengage from worldly patterns and to be transformed into the likeness of Jesus. But what if the patterns of the world are so deeply ingrained in us that we do not see them as something needing change, but rather perceive them as the norm, the natural order of things, or as basic laws that govern the world? This may be exactly the position we are in when it comes to understanding how we live in the world economically. What economic presuppositions or principles are we holding that conform to the patterns of the world? Are we rendering more unto Caesar than we should?

Missional Economics is the issue and name of a book by Michael Barram, a professor of theology and religious studies at Saint Mary's College of California. The subtitle, *Biblical Justice and Christian Formation*, identifies his focus on the economic justice called for in both Old and New Testaments and how we

should be transformed or formed by scripture. He reviews the scriptures which are replete with calls to live with economic integrity, justice, and generosity.

Barram proposes that our economic lives are part of our mission from God to the world, but we need biblical and spiritual formation to do economics rightly and justly. To learn from scripture, he looks at the biblical narratives, the law, the prophets, and the New Testament. Two basic narratives he discusses are the Garden of Eden and the Exodus which both helped to form Jewish thought. God's economy in Eden was "abundance." Everything humans needed was provided. Then the fall brings about a change in the world's economy summed up in the word "scarcity." Now humans must work the ground with thorns and trouble. We work, think, and plan out of a mindset and fear of scarcity in which we fight to get our piece of the pie (or more) and then hoard it.

The second narrative is the Exodus story of God delivering the people from slavery and oppression. Over and over Israel is told not to oppress people because they know the hardships of oppression. Instead, just as God

delivered them, Israel is to take on the role of liberator, freeing the oppressed and helping those on the margins of society—or in biblical terms, the widows, orphans, and sojourners.

Next, the law codified God's desire for just economic treatment between people with rules on honest weights and scales, not moving boundary stones, redeemer guardians, and the wealthy landowners leaving behind portions of their crops for the poor to glean. These last two are profoundly illustrated in the story of Ruth and Boaz. Deuteronomy and Leviticus are full of rules of economic principles including lending practices and the year of Jubilee, and we can see God's heart for economic justice within them.

The prophets too speak to God's interest in missional economics as they rail and warn against Israel's treatment of the poor but still offer blessings should Israel repent of cheating and abusing those who are marginalized and without the resources to help themselves. God works on the principle of abundance and calls on the covenant community

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