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March 2009: Commitment: A Continuing Act of Faith

Seeds of Commitment, Fruit of Freedom

This editorial is co-written by David Janzen and Analí Gatlin—one way to signal a transition of SMC leadership over the next six months from David to Analí.

We are a privileged people. Though we may opt for an economically simpler life style, our advantages are always near at hand. The world spreads before us endless places to live, jobs, churches (not to mention toothpastes, cereals, and flavored coffees). There is always somewhere to go next, a new experience to be had, and often these options are not inherently wrong.

But sometimes this privilege turns on us, and we become paralyzed with the infinite options. We float from one opportunity to the next as soon as the old one turns out not to be exactly what we had hoped for. Our society tells us that we deserve a quality of life that comes from continually refining our preferences. I mean, goodness, we don't want to make the wrong choice and end up stuck in a job we despise, a city that is no longer fun, or a church that, heaven forbid, has problems. So why commit?

This brings us to a mystery at the heart of the human condition—we want to love with abandon and, at the same time, we want to be free. Humanly speaking this usually means that love breaks down and cannot be repaired. ("Repaired" – what an apt metaphor!) The Declaration of Independence assumes that freedom is our right, our possession. Christians rather ask, "Who gave us this freedom and what is it for?"



Allan DeLaurell and Allene Gatlin dance the night away at the Hope Fellowship Posadas.

Though Jesus did not have the options of a consumer society like ours, the world was at his fee; he could have it all. The temptation narrative in Luke's gospel tells about the ambitions Jesus considered and rejected because they would end up serving the Devil.

Jesus narrowed his options again and again by choosing to serve God's kingdom-coming-into-this-world. Jesus chose a few disciples with whom he would spend most of his time in an itinerant intentional community of training and service. He turned from the admiring Galilean crowds toward Jerusalem to take on The Powers that enslave the world through sin and the fear of death. He offered his body as a tortured sacrifice, demonstrating once-and-for-all the non-violent and persistent character of God's love for a world that has lost its way.

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Commitment: A Continuing Act of Faith

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Jesus did not keep his options open for a long life, but trusted in God to reward faithfulness with resurrection.

What is our response to Jesus' total commitment of himself for us and his call to follow? Committing to a particular people is essential to our spiritual formation, it is how we *learn* to be disciples of Christ, or better yet, it is how we are disciples of Jesus.

The first major commitment I (Anali) made was to be baptized into Hope Fellowship. During the year-long preparation with my mentor, Ruth Boardman-Alexander, I realized that baptism and becoming a member of Hope Fellowship was my own decision, not just an expectation I was born to fulfill. My faith and involvement in the church were now up to me, and to be honest, this was somewhat frightening. I had become pretty comfortable thinking that my parents were my link to God. By the grace of God and with the support of brothers and sisters, I took the first step of committing to Hope Fellowship. Of course at twelve, my understanding of commitment was somewhat limited. The truth is, at whatever age we commit to Jesus, we can't fully know what we are getting into, but we are given faith that God, who is calling us, will work in and through our decision.

As a member of the church I was expected to take an active role in its life and health, so I taught Sunday school and mentored a few of the youth. Watching and walking with the young people of Hope Fellowship as they learned about God, the church, and their role in the Christian story deepened and sometimes even challenged my own faith. Trying to meet these expectations of membership has been part of my spiritual formation and, most times, a major blessing.



David Janzen passes the baton to Anali Gatlin...yeah, we know we're a little cheesy

Becoming part of Hope Fellowship, has sent me on a journey that I would have never been able to imagine for myself. I find freedom in the realization that making a commitment does not at all mean we are trapped. In fact, we should have our eyes and ears open to how God is working and how we are being called to adapt. I'm just beginning to learn that commitment is a call to faithfulness, openness, and creativity.

According to Richard Hays, (The Moral Vision of the New Testament) the "great commission is not merely interested in soliciting converts; the gospel, according to Matthew, summons people to join a disciplined community of Jesus' followers who put his teachings into practice." P. 97. It is important as we learn how to follow Christ that we surround ourselves with brothers and sisters who know us well and will support and hold us accountable to the life we hope to lead. This trust, love, and accountability takes time to develop between people and so requires a commitment that allows us the freedom to open ourselves to each other.

Spreading the gospel does not stop at speaking a few nice words or volunteering at the soup kitchen (though good things to do). As John Alexander from Church of the Sojourners so often reminded us, effective gospel sharing requires that we offer long-term account-

ability and relationships to specific people, including the ones who annoy and bring out the worst in us. What a powerful witness to the gospel of God's love, faithfulness, and grace if we can humble ourselves and model reconciled relationships on a daily basis with our brothers and sisters!

Often we fear letting people too close because they might see how messed up we are--we prefer the image that people have of us from afar. Sometimes we might even think that we are damaging the church if others would know how deeply flawed we are. However, by sharing our mess-ups with those that have committed to love and walk with us toward redemption, we strengthen the body because the body is only as healthy as all its parts, which includes each one of us. The love of Jesus draws us to each other as we share our lives in spirit and truth.

Stages of Commitment: I (David) have observed that our commitments to community often go through several stages. First, some of us (that has included me) fall in love with the idea of community. What's not to love? It is a radical and holistic way to meet human needs, model justice and, these days, is a cool thing to do in the PAPA FEST crowd. God can use our vision of an ideal of community to draw us into life with a particular group of real people.

Often folks new to community feel like they are "in love." Everything they discover is new and wonderful. But after a few weeks or months, they see that this group does not, and never will, match up to the ideal that they are in love with. Bonhoeffer, in Life Together, warns that this ideal of community then becomes the enemy of real community because it justifies our lack of love and commitment to the real sisters and brothers whom God has given us for our salvation.

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Shalom Connections

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Sojo Apprentice Colin Redemer teaches the beginning steps of swing dancing at the Celibacy Ceremony.

News From Sojourners

By Katie Piché

Do Sojourners dance? In the “good ol’ days” Conrad Yoder would turn our Potrero House garage and hay-loft into a dance floor complete with a disco ball. In recent years there has been a gap in the Sojo dance story...until now. So far in 2009 we have been a dancing machine. At the end of January we celebrated Annie Seward’s 21st birthday with free-range chicken and a dance. We hung up the old disco ball and let it shine brightly until it fell from the ceiling. Even though we were 30 or so people crammed into a converted garage, no one was injured. Dawn Langston quickly vacuumed up the debris, and we went on dancing the night away to songs like “We are Family.”

On February 7, 2009, we gathered to celebrate with Tim as he took a vow of celibacy, and we took a vow to support him. The ceremony was an extended Sojourner worship service filled with heart-felt singing and inspired oratory. The reception that followed was a big party with a fancy pasta meal and a time to bless Tim. The day was a gift not only to Tim, but to the whole church, as many of our gifts were brought out, and we were able to serve, feast, and dance together at the table of God.

Matt and Mary Toney are expecting a baby, and we are excited! Please

keep the baby in your prayers. At almost 20 weeks, an ultra-sound revealed that there is a hole in the baby’s heart. At the time this is being written, we are waiting for test results to find out more about what this means. Please also pray for Matt and Mary and their spirits as they turn to God in this uncertain time.

Please pray for us as we are discerning if Tim and Jenny Lockie should be sent to become full time missionaries with InnerCHANGE, the organization that Tim currently works with. They are specifically thinking of going to Caracas, Venezuela. Jenny recently took a trip there accompanied by Hannah Zazvorka to check out what life there might look like. You can read more about this at: timandjenny-lockie.blogspot.com.

Please pray for Christi Beutler, an apprentice this year, as she faces some potential health problems. Please pray for Louise Harris and Rick DiMicco as they have lost their jobs due to this economy. Please keep Jenny Prosa in your prayers as life throws struggles her way. Zoe Mullery’s adoption process continues to be slow and getting slower as the state cannot afford to fully staff social work positions. Please pray for us as we think about how to care of one another in a tight economy, and as we run tight on housing. □

Tim Otto's Celibacy Ceremony
(aka Celibation)

Friends,

On February 7th here at Church of the Sojourners we had a celibacy ceremony in which I took a vow of lifelong celibacy. I also affirmed my commitment to living my whole life in Christian community. Friends and family graciously came from all over the country to witness the vow that I took. Friday night we had dinner and watched a great skit in which I was roasted. Saturday was the ceremony (which featured some amazing music, poetry, and sermonizing), and afterwards we had a dinner and dance. All in all, what some of us dubbed the "Celibation" turned out to be a ton of fun.

As fun as it was, it is a little hard to explain--especially in a non-Catholic context--why anyone would make such a commitment. Thankfully, Debbie Gish worked hard on a sermon that I think does a marvelous job. Her sermon follows.

I feel a need to comment that my taking a vow of celibacy is not a result of thinking that this is the only faithful choice for homosexual Christians. Celibacy is what I think God has for me in the specific context of Sojourners. In the next year I hope to write something about homosexuality that might contribute to the conversation taking place in the church. Please pray for me as I do that, and I'd be interested in any thoughts you have, or book recommendations.

Grace and Peace,
Tim Otto



"The Boundary Lines Have Fallen for Me in Pleasant Places"

February 7, 2009
By Debbie Gish

Dearly beloved, we are gathered together in the sight of God. What a great line! We all recognize this as the classic opening line at weddings. Dearly beloved, we are gathered together in the sight of God. Nothing could be truer right now.

Some time ago, this idea of taking a vow of celibacy was conceived in Tim's heart. And as he thought, prayed, wrestled with, and explored all that taking this vow would imply, another little seed was germinating as well. "If I do this thing, I could gather all the people I like and love the most, all my dearly beloveds, in one place and at one time, and I could have an incredible party!" You are all Tim's most dearly beloved friends, family, brothers and sisters, and it gives him incredible joy that you have gathered together to witness his vow, worship our God and to party! On Tim's behalf, I say thank you!

And so, dearly beloved, we are gathered together in the sight of God, and I have no doubt that God is smiling with delight!

So, what are we doing here? Probably all of you have attended numerous weddings in your lifetime, and probably most have a theoretical framework to make some sense of the vows being exchanged in that context. But probably most of us here are good children of the Reformation and have never attended the ordination of a priest, monk or nun where vows of celibacy are most commonly taken in the Christian context. I know I never have.

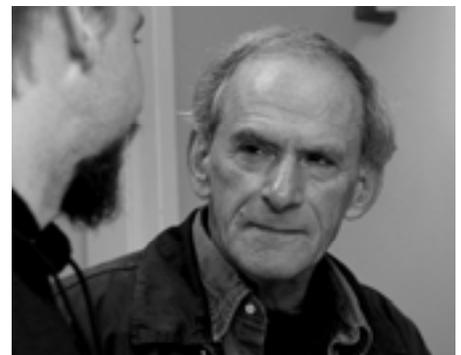
But is that what's going on here? Is Tim becoming a monk? Are we at Church of the Sojourners so caught up in this New Monasticism thing that we need a real live monk or two to validate our inclusion in the movement?

Or is Tim just giving up and giving in? Tim is someone who has struggled with, celebrated and questioned his own sexuality and identity openly and honestly, and has engaged with equal candor the parallel questions and struggles the church at large has tackled for years. With this vow of celibacy, is Tim finally making a public statement about which side he's taking in the great conservative/liberal church fight going on?

No, something deeper, something more profound is going on here today. This vow of celibacy that Tim is taking is not just a promise to not marry nor to not pursue a romantic relationship nor to not have sex. This is not just a vow of "I will not," but rather more mysteriously this is a vow of "I will". This vow of celibacy is a positive vow of "I will forsake all others for the love of Christ," "I will embrace with joy and gratitude that which I have been given." This vow of celibacy is a vow of fidelity to Christ and to his Church.

Here before us today we will witness the promise of a man who has examined his life, and has reflected on what he has been given, and he has decided that it is good. It is both "good enough" and "very good" all at the same time.

Good enough: Good enough smacks of a C+ on an English exam. "You can do better than that!" mom would say. "Good enough" conjures images of complacency, resignation, and stagnation. It lacks passion, drive or vision, or so it seems. But I want to challenge this assumption, and I



Rick DiMicco talks with Mattoney the eve before the Celibacy Ceremony.

believe Tim's vow today challenges this assumption.

When Tim first talked to us at Sojourners about taking a vow of celibacy, one of the things he said he longed for was to become a contented 86-year-old man. Not your average life goal. "Good enough" is about contentment. And contentment, especially in this place and time, is actually a rather revolutionary, rather counter-cultural, and I believe a profoundly Christian notion. Most of us stand at the fences of our lives, fences either constructed by others, constructed by circumstances, or even constructed by ourselves, and we long for those greener pastures on the other side. Our culture reinforces this sense of lack by marketing to us the idea that what we have, be it our clothes, our food, our toys or even our spouse or our church, is not good enough and that something far better is available for a mere \$19.99.

What would happen if we were to turn around, put our backs to those fences and gaze long and hard at what we have been given. I believe that if we were to look with eyes of faith in the goodness of God, we could declare with David in Psalm 16, "The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage."

This is not about tidying up the messy things in our lives; this is not about denying the pain of dreams or desires unfulfilled or even of real needs not being met. This is about believing and declaring and living a life reflecting the conviction that "You are my Lord; I have no good thing apart from you" as this same Psalm begins.

Tim has shared with many of you that the journey towards this day began nearly twenty years ago when he, together with Sojourners,

"Good enough" is about contentment. And contentment, especially in this place and time, is actually a rather revolutionary, rather counter-cultural, and I believe a profoundly Christian notion.

discerned that he would not pursue a romantic relationship. I personally walked with Tim in those days. This was neither an easy decision nor one taken lightly by any of us involved. But through the years Tim has considered the boundary lines, Tim has examined the limitation, and Tim has

decided that what he has been given inside those boundaries is good, very good, far better in fact than "good enough." Tim has come to the place of seeing and experiencing a garden growing and blooming within the boundary lines. In his life and service in the Body of Christ, and as he's chosen to accept what he's been given in the celibate life, he has encountered the loving embrace of Jesus and his people. And he has discovered that he has an incredible love and passion for the Body of Christ and a profound vision for the Church to be the Church, for the Body of Christ to be just that the living, breathing body of Christ. I would guess that nearly everyone in this room is a richer person because of

Tim's gift of articulating in word and deed his love for God and his love for the people of God.

Today, Tim is joining the company of Paul, John the Baptist, and Jesus himself, as well as innumerable brothers and sisters throughout Christian history, in forsaking all others and embracing a life of celibacy, not for celibacy's sake but for the goal of living an undivided, undistracted life in and for Jesus and his people. Tim has found his vocation not in celibacy per se, but in the words and vision of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux as a vocation of being "love in the heart of the church." Because he has tasted and seen that the Lord is good in the context of the body of Christ, he wants to offer himself, gladly and self-sacrificially, back into her service. And today, Tim has commissioned me to declare boldly to all of you that this is good, this is both "good enough" and very, very good.

As our brother takes this vow, I want to remind you that Tim is neither a hero nor a fool. To the hero we gaze at longingly or disparagingly and say, "I could never do that." And to the fool we mutter, "I would never do that." No, historically and today concretely the vow of →→→



Dale leads Tim Otto and the congregation in the vows at the Celibacy Ceremony.

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celibacy is intended to be a sign to the church, a gift to the church, a living reminder to the church that her first love is Jesus as well. Henri Nouwen writes in *Clowning in Rome* "The celibate makes his life into a visible witness for the priority of God in our lives... Celibates are people who, by not attaching themselves to any one particular person, remind us that the relationship with God is the beginning, the source, and the goal of all human relationships." P.48.

Marriage is intended to be a parallel sign, equally not intended to be an end unto itself. In Ephesians 5 we read, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." And the part often left out of wedding sermons is "This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church." Jesus' first love is his bride the church. We have so bought our culture's idolatry of romantic love that we have forgotten marriage's highest calling to be a sign, to be a sign of the love of Christ for her bride and a foreshadowing of the wedding feast to come. Maybe here in San Francisco some may raise the question "why marry at all?" but overall, few question and most delight in vows exchanged as lovers stare adoringly into each



Closing the Celibacy Ceremony with the Psalters version of "Our Father"

other's eyes. We think we don't need to understand the higher call, the primary call of marriage; we think that we already understand what the couple is doing.

But in Tim's own words, "a promise of celibacy may be just weird enough to get people to ask questions. In response, [Tim] hopes he can say something about the goodness of God's adventure in the form of the church that beats what our culture has to offer. [Tim] has come to the place of suspecting that celibacy may be an ideal way to proclaim with his whole being—body, heart, and soul—the good news of God's kingdom, and how that kingdom is being made visible even now in the church."

And this is a publicly taken vow, before all of you today, with pomp and circumstance, prayers and blessings. It's taken publicly because frankly, vows are hard to keep. Tim wants us to remind him of his vow and help him keep it. But that's not the only reason this vow is being taken publicly today. A primary reason is because this is our vow as well. This is a vow made because of and for the sake of the body of Christ. And Tim is living that out in the particular with his brothers and sisters at Church of the Sojourners. And all of us in this room and especially those of us at Sojourners are reverently receiving the gift he is giving and are offering in return the promise to be family to

him, in the first family sense that Jesus claims we should be to each other in the context of the Body. This is a concrete promise to love and cherish and include and rejoice and weep over the long haul. There are no orphans in the Body of Christ. And there are no fifth wheels either! Tim's promise to us and ours to him are promises that remind us that we are an inclusive family as believers that fruitfully multiplies not through biology, but through the grace of God.

A favorite novel of Tim's is *Jayber Crow* by Wendell Berry. It chronicles the life of Jayber who is a barber and a bachelor, living his many years in the same place with the same people in a small, rather dying rural southern town. His life is eventful and frankly uneventful, but as it draws to a close Jayber reflects, "I am a man who has hoped, in time, that his life, when poured out at the end, would say 'good-good-good-good-good!' like a gallon jug of the prime local spirit. I am a man of losses, regrets and griefs. I am an old man full of love. I am a man of faith." I am confident that should God grant Tim 86 long years, he will be the contented old man he longs to be because his hope lies not in what he will make of himself but in embracing what he has been given from a good-good-good-good-good God who is smiling with delight as Tim offers him this vow today. □



Antonia Guatemala and Krista Creeger dance at Annie's 21st Birthday.

All Kinds of Greed

By Marcus Rempel, Ploughshares Community Farm

Jesus warns his disciples to be on their guard "against all kinds of greed." (Luke 12:15) What all kinds of greed are there? In the instance of this utterance, Jesus continues, "For one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." He goes on to tell the parable of the rich fool who thinks a full granary is assurance of ease, enjoyment and long life. (He dies.)

This rich fool is not the fool of my generation. Although the bite of the recession may soon teach us to become hoarders of things, this is not the kind of greed we are presently afflicted with, as a rule. Maybe it was growing up in a world awash in cheap goods from China, or maybe it was the accompanying sway of Feng Shui (that Eastern equivalent of "cleanliness is next to godliness"). Whatever, my generation has decided that cluttering our lives with more stuff is definitely not cool. What is our kind of greed?

I remember in my early years in community hearing a warning against being "spiritually greedy" by Tabitha Langel. An odd warning from a Christian elder. But she was on to something. The rich young rulers in our day may not be piling up wealth and possessions, but we are greedy about accumulating experiences. We are lovers

of books and music and self-discovery journeys. We have opportunities unlike any other in human history to go new places, meet new people, encounter new ideas. The world wide web, the wide, wide world present a googleplex of ever-new adventures to us. We are explorers. We love the new. We are perpetually restless, quickly bored.

On a recent trip to Plow Creek, elder David Gale, one of the founding members and a carpenter noted how many young people are coming to "explore community," but none can commit to a life in community. Opportunities to learn sustainable agriculture at Plow Creek are a great draw for many young people, but rare is the young person who sustains more than one turn of the seasons on the land. Some other community, some other program, some new opportunity, some new goal or experience beckons, and they move on. I'm reminded of parties I attended as a teenager, milling about, huddling together with kids for laughs and protection in this circle, then that circle, always looking over our shoulders to see if someone was having more fun somewhere else.

It is the patience, the ordinariness, the "opportunity cost" of life in community that is the cost of discipleship for my generation. Even as I write this, I must confess that the most stimulating part of my life right now is a new set of relationships, with Karen refugees from Burma. Surely making friends with refu-

gees is an experience of Jesus' kingdom. But if I look honestly into my heart, I must also confess that the adventure of these new friendships are providing a buzz that was starting to wear off for me at Ploughshares, which I helped found partly out of impatience with Grain of Wheat, which I joined partly out of discontent with my home church and to put a little distance between myself and my family, to have a spiritual circle for me to express myself in. Have I been following Jesus, or my own appetites? "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed."

I'll conclude with the first vow in the Ploughshares covenant, the vow of stability. I did most of the writing for this vow, probably because, of any one, I most needed to hear its challenge.

"We recognize that without a commitment to be steadfast, our relationships with one another and with the land are robbed of their potential for profound love, deep learning and true health. As with seeds, we recognize the new life that comes out of the adventures of moving about and cross-pollinating with other places and other people. Still, real fruit is not borne without setting down roots, without deep commitments to a particular place and a particular people. Our pursuit of fruitful sustainability requires commitment to stability." □

Commitment as Brashness and Humility

By Rich Foss

At age twelve I thought I heard the Lord call me to preach. I assumed that he meant a Pentecostal preacher, the only ones I knew. From then on, when people asked me what I was going to do after high school, I said, "I am going to Seattle Bible Training School to become a preacher."

Then when I was sixteen I became disabled with rheumatoid arthritis. The first six months of my senior year of high school I spent undergoing surgeries and rehab. At the Rehab Hospital I met with a vocational counselor. I told him my preacher plans.

One day he asked me, "Richard, what if you physically cannot be a pastor?"

"Then God will have something else for me to do," I replied.

By the spring of my senior year I was convinced that the Lord was not calling me to go to Seattle Bible Training School, but to the University of North Dakota. I applied.

One day that spring after getting out of the Rehab, we were driving home from church when my Dad said, "I thought you were going to Seattle Bible Training School. Why are you applying to the University of North Dakota?"

"Because it's God's will," I said. From the vantage point of forty years later, I marvel both at my brashness and my correctness in understanding God's will for my life.

That change of plan led, eight years

later, to another decision based on a sense of God's call—Sarah and I committed ourselves to being communal members of Plow Creek Fellowship.

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Adam, Stephanie, and Seth Vaughan... ready for the Chicago winter

Commitment: A Continuing Act of Faith

Hope Fellowship News

By Gabriela Gatlin

En Hope Fellowship, a veces alguien comienza hablando en español and finishes speaking in English. Or someone is supposed to translate English to Spanish and sin pensar translates back to English. Other times when the person who is translating queda confundido, the people who are receiving translation ofrecen la mejor traducción.

Sometimes we're downright Pentecostal; sometimes we don't know what language we are speaking. Our words and our syntax are flexible. Hopefully, we are also allowing the Spirit of God to work the same graciousness into our relationships within the church.

At a recent membership meeting, we set aside business to listen to Luis Matias-Cruz and Alan Caruthers share testimonies on hope and healing. Luis shared about the pain and grief he and his children have experienced in the year since Ramona's death. Luis also shared about the tremendous gift he has received in realizing that God has been pursuing him and his family despite himself. Alan Caruthers shared about his often quiet struggles with myelofibrosis and the uncertainties he and Laura are learning to manage. Alan also shared his appreciation for friendships in Hope Fellowship that have remained open and extended even when he hasn't responded. We closed the time of testimonies by sharing communion and thanking God for the corporate healing we were privileged to experience by recommitting to our relationships with Luis and Alan.

During the Advent season we caroled one night and went on a posada the next week. We ate tamales, broke the star of Bethlehem piñata and enjoyed a few salsa moves from Alan DeLaurel and Alene Gatlin. We also celebrated advent by considering how God is building us up to be a dwelling place for Godself. Philip Bridgewater

went all out and built the frame of a small house that developed each week into more of a dwelling place. During worship on Epiphany we brought symbols of our common life to place in the house. Now it looks like our own prayer altar in the Meeting House.

Jonas Arroyo celebrated his first birthday. Emily Rowe-Miller is studying in Peru for her Goshen SST this spring. Gabriela Gatlin graduated with a Masters in Education and is happy to be teaching reading at the community college and doing some housing and credit counseling at Waco Community Development. Neil Rowe-Miller was impressed to note that 21 people attended morning devotions the other day at the World Hunger Farm. Allan DeLaurel traveled to the Dominican Republic for 10 days as a well-drilling mentor for the Harvard chapter of Engineers Without Borders. Allan broke with a string of disappointing well ventures and successfully drilled a well for Tireo Abajo, a neighborhood outside Constanza. On Monday nights in the Meeting House, Francisco is leading the only Spanish language Alcoholics Anonymous meeting in Waco, and throughout the week he bikes around town, personally carrying a message of hope and change

to individuals who cannot attend the meetings.

Hope Fellowship is, as always, a busy and chaotic group of people, but perhaps the overarching activity and "news" of our common life in the last few months has been the activity of remembrance. In November we held a memorial celebration at the World Hunger Farm for Ramona Matias-Ryan as she had asked to be done a year after her death. At that celebration and since then we have been remembering stories of our dear sister. Ruth Boardman-Alexander led Children's Time during worship one Sunday and asked the kids to raise their hands if they remembered having Ramona for a Sunday school teacher or playing at her house or eating homemade pizza in her kitchen. Gerson Matias-Ryan's hand shot up and he exclaimed, "I did. I lived there!" Ruth told the story of a Sunday when Ramona herself led Children's Time and shocked the entire congregation by dumping a big container of dirt over her head. Right there in the middle of worship! Ramona explained that she did this to remind us that even when we do terrible things and we are dirty, God still loves us. We are thankful for the love that God gave us through Ramona, and we miss her tremendously.



Ramona and Luis Matias-Ryan

When I remember Ramona, I remember her love of languages. Ramona was devoted to language learning, and she was a purist with languages. She always knew the correct translation, and she kept her languages separate. If she were here today, I would want to tell Ramona that current research in second language acquisition suggests that bilinguals codeswitch (for example, speak “Spanglish”) not out of laziness or because they can’t speak either language in isolation but because they *can* combine the two and produce a richer message. Most likely, in our brains multiple languages are not stored in isolation. They overlap. They have open borders.

Although Ramona might balk at this position on codeswitching, I know she wanted to believe that we don’t in fact live in a world of extremes. On so many levels, we carry the burden of an ugly “black and white” history past and present, but our actual

reality is a spectrum of skin color and many cultures and a variety of language production gracias a la obra que Dios ya comenzó desde hace mucho tiempo.

Especially when we remember Ramona, we hope for a day when our nation’s borders will be more open and more humane. We hope for a day when the election of an African-American Democrat for president won’t provoke other Texans to buy out gun shops and perhaps cause Baylor students to hang a noose on campus and assault each other with their words. We hope for a day when barriers of prejudice and misunderstanding will be diminished. While we continue working to move into those border regions and break down those barriers, at Hope Fellowship vamos a seguir gozando de la fluidez que tenemos entre el español y el English as a sign of hope y dar gracias por el espíritu de Ramona que todavía fluye entre nosotros. □



The Dwelling Place created by Phillip Bridgewater

Exploring Baptism

By Aranzazú Torres

My name is Aranzazú Torres I am 15 years old, and I am a part of Hope Fellowship in Waco, Texas.

For a while I have been interested in getting baptized, I felt I was ready to make that commitment not only to myself, but also to the church I am a part of. To me, baptism and commitment are connected to each other. I believe baptism is coming out and showing others that you have chosen to follow Christ. I also believe that when someone chooses to get baptized, they also choose to commit to a Body of Christ.

About a year ago I began taking baptism classes with one of the pastors at my church (Nancy Gatlin). During these classes I realized how much commitment to the church through baptism could actually have in store for me.

For me, committing myself to learning about baptism was one of the best things I have done. I opened myself spiritually so much more than ever before. I was able to finally see through all the earlier fog to what I really believed in. I was able to take the time I hadn’t yet to realize who I was in Christ. In those classes, I was able to fully commit myself to finding my path to Christ. I realized how important it was to me to become a part of the amazing body of Christ here in Waco.

Although I have not been baptized yet, I hope to be soon.



Bethany and J.B. Smith planting a tree at their wedding ceremony

Commitment: A Continuing Act of Faith

The Rogers Park SNews

By Doug Selph



Doug here. Yes, my friends, welcome to another mundane month from the Rogers Park huddle. No Godzillas. No aliens. Just us working, eating, and trying to get along. This is the stuff of life; and God has declared it holy.

In keeping with the present theme of commitment I have decided to color the current snews around the related concept of *dedication*.



Jolyn

DEDICATED TO KEEPING HEALTHY: Jolyn got up at 4:30am the other day to go with Nieta to the GYM! Ouch! Now that's a dedication we should all imitate.



Nieta foreground, Brianna and Hope in the background



Jim

DEDICATED TO PEACE: Jim had a parting of ways with CPT (Christian Peace Maker Teams). But he isn't quitting! He is now seeing if he can get set up with the Presbyterian Church to sponsor his continued peace keeping and relationship building with the people of Columbia.



Sharon and Kylie in a high chair

DEDICATED TO HER KIDS: Sharon highly recommends the parenting book by John Roseman. Sound bite: Parents these days give too much attention to psychobabble nonsense: let's do it like it was done back in the 50's.



Nina

DEDICATED TO SERVICE: Nina, JoLynn, and this guy Ray continue to snag 100's of Odwallas and related foods from this dumpster they know about. Nina is jazzed because she just found this old industrial cart someone discarded which she was able to fix it up to help her with the task.



My wife Lisa. She told me not to include this but I think it's brilliant. Just brilliant.

DEDICATED TO BEAUTY: My wife Lisa manages to pick up several bouquets of flowers from the trash bins at Walgreens.



A bunch of us assembling the arms. Barb, Orwin, Jim, Ronn, and Tim.

DEDICATED TO HIS KIDS (CLASSROOM): Tim's got these four very cool programmable robot arms for his kids to work with. They were kind of hard to put together though.



Ronn wondering what he is talking about

DEDICATED TO A HEALTHY WORLD: Ronn continues to work hard building a new economy based on love while working in the midst of an unrighteous petroleum one. That is, he is heavily involved in Reunion Property Management, Reba Works, and Plan & Simple, which employs many interns and fellowship folk.

And because, when I interviewed my smattering of folk with the question: 'What do you think about commitment?' the response was a blank stare (or in one case she just fell dead over asleep), I decided to include something with a bit more flare: TELL ME ABOUT A NEAR DEATH EXPERIENCE. Ah sweet. Now that's more like it.

DEATH COMES A KNOCKING on Ben's door: He and his friend go outside with his air soft gun in hand. There is a little kid on the corner they start chatting with. I don't know, maybe they were a little rude with him or something. After they part company, Ben stuffs the gun underneath his belt. But that little kid went and called the police. The police come, pull a REAL gun on him, do the frisk routine, put hand cuffs on him, the whole bit. The cops are super serious and take his toy gun and fire it into the ground to make sure it's not real. They throw him in the back seat of the police car. They think is part of a gang. He and his friend are taken for a ride. Have you ever been in a police car? It's all plastic back there. Very weird. Ben had hand cuff marks on his wrists for a while after that.



Ben



Barb & Ben spirit mode



Barb

DEATH COMES A KNOCKING on Barbs' door: It's the middle of a cold winter day when she gets off the bus. The ground is icy and she SLIPS so that half of her body is under the bus. All attempts to slide away are useless on the ice. The bus starts pulling away while she is still underneath there. The bus begins to roll. She's going to get cut in two. Frantic, she starts pounding on the side of the bus and yelling at the top of her lungs. The bus stops just in time and the bus driver comes out hysterically upset over himself that he almost killed someone. Barb ends up having to comfort HIM.

Some people couldn't really relate to Dedication or Near Death. So here are their random interesting contributions:



Meg spirit mode

WHAT'S THIS DOING HERE? Okay, Meg tells me this joke. I have no idea what the pumpernickel. 'What time is it when a pastor looks at his watch during a sermon?' Answer: *Absolutely nothing.* Huh?

SOMETHING INTERESTING: Close your eyes. Now, how do you spell Qatar? Wrong! There is no U after the Q. Isn't that weird? Well anyway, Orwin's company presently has a contract with some folk in Qatar to build a wall for some fuel tanks. He's an engineer. He doesn't get to travel there, but he's the architect. Cool.



Sally and Judy with love

Reba Place News

By Heather Clark

On January 3, we helped move covenant partners Chico and Tatiana Fajardo-Heflin to Ford Heights, an extremely impoverished, mostly African-American suburb about an hour south of Evanston (see the Dec. '08 issue for more details). We wonder what will spring up from the seeds they plant in their neighbors' hearts--and in an abandoned lot near their house. Tatiana reports that she thinks all the neighborhood police now know them (having been stopped and questioned by all of them, since the usual purpose of white folk in the neighborhood is to buy drugs). They ask for continued prayer that they can find work.

Practicing member Camille Hobbes has just relocated to Tulsa in the company of Oklahoman Daniel Walker, a friend met at last summer's PAPAfest. They are exploring the possibility of a long-term commitment to each other and feel led to live in proximity while Daniel completes his degree. We bless them in this, though we'll miss Camille's infectious laughter and enthusiasm around here. One small consolation in the midst of our leave-taking was getting to see Peter Velthuisen in



Camille Hobbes and Daniel Walker at the goodbye party

one of Camille's long skirts at her goodbye party!

Anali Gatlin, another practicing member, will be returning to Hope Fellowship in several months after her two year sojourn here in the frozen north. We look forward to staying connected with her in her new role as SMC Coordinator and are grateful for her willingness to serve all of our communities in this way.

Four of our six apprentices continue to work for RPF business Reunion Property Management in Rogers Park. Barbara Stern, RPM accountant, especially appreciates Jolyn Redman's recent work in tenant relations, which frees Barb to crunch more numbers!

Nominating Committee members have been leading us in a process to identify the right person to serve as community leader when Allan Howe's term ends in June. We appreciate God's wisdom and provision of good leadership throughout many years.

A number of us have been attending a Jan.-March Monday evening seminar on Healing in Community, led by practicing therapists (and

RPC members) Karl and Charlotte Lehman. We're experimenting weekly with some useful tools for learning to perceive the Lord's presence and receive healing for painful memories. Karl exclaims weekly: "Isn't it cool to see Jesus healing people?" It is!

We continue to be blessed with a steady stream of visitors—and by the faithful folks in our midst who welcome them in many ways. Recent passers-through include leaders from Grain of Wheat community in Winnipeg, several couples from Solomon's Porch in Minneapolis, and continuing busloads of students from Greenville College in southern Illinois.

Folks at the Clearing recently welcomed Suha Oh, who has come from South Korea to the US as part of the IVEP program (International Volunteer Exchange Program) through MCC. She's already spent 6 months in Newton, Kansas and will stay with us for 6 months. She's trained as a graphic artist and is currently working on a promotional video for Christian Peacemaker Teams.

Newcomer Seth Charles Vaughan passed his two-month checkup with flying colors, reported grateful mommy Stephanie. Now that Seth is



Jesse Miller is all smiles after winning the door prize for "Best Camille Lookalike."

burbling and cooing during meetings, a few of us find our attention wandering to thoughts of how sweet his bald little head smells! We're waiting prayerfully with practicing members Josh and Candace McCallister (and soon-to-be-big-brother Jedi) for another new arrival scheduled to make an April appearance.

The Evanston Atelier continues to make its artful presence known on Main Street, offering recent classes

in watercolors and charcoal figure drawings, to name a few. Upcoming events include another show featuring new work by the four founding artists, as well as a juried competition with various prize offerings. Leaps of faith come in all colors and textures, and the ongoing experiment at this wonderful space is one of them. □



Brandon Lane, Elizabeth Stone, and Andy Ross playing hard at Peter Velthuisen's Hockey Birthday Bash

Becoming the Answer to our Prayers: Prayer for Ordinary Radicals

By Shane Claiborne and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, InterVarsity Press, 2008

Reviewed by Allan Howe

Two of the leading young Jesus-centered prophets of our time—Shane Claiborne and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove—have come together to produce a short, readable book about prayer and action. It is full of memorable stories, biblical and theological reflections, and pithy comments. Their case for shaping our lives in response to the deep prayers of our hearts is compelling.

The thesis of Becoming the Answer to Our Prayers is stated twice in the introduction:

“The longer we pray, the more we are sure of this: ‘Prayer is not so much about convincing God to do what we want God to do as it is about convincing ourselves to do what God wants us to do.’”

“Here’s the good news: prayer and action can go together; in fact they must. Otherwise we have little more than a bunch of inactive believers or worn-out activists, and neither do much good for the world.”

The book unfolds as reflections on three key passages of scripture. The Lord’s prayer with its strongly corporate character (“our father,” “forgive us,” etc.) is the basis for a strong insistence on Christian community as the vehicle of God’s work in the world. Jesus’ prayer in John 17 for the unity of the church is the occasion for many stories about practical ways the community of Jesus is taking shape in our time. And Paul’s prayer in Ephesians 1 triggers a host of personal stories and accounts of the Saints, all of which point to the joining of prayer and life.

In the background is a recurrent critique of contradictions visible in the world-wide Christian church:

“The church as we know it is a tragically dysfunctional family, in which some children are starving while others have food stashed in their closets.” (p. 24)

“We learn to survive together or we sink to the bottom alone. That’s the economics of the church in a nutshell.” (p. 40)

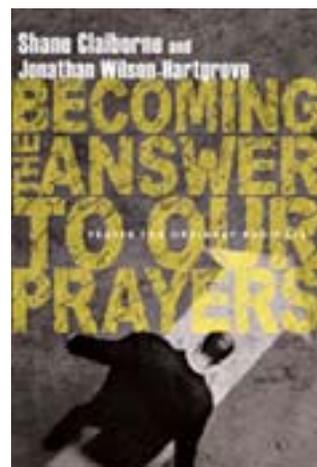
“To live God’s way of life in the world is to know that the poor are our brothers and sisters. If they are poor, then we are poor.” (p. 42)

Jonathan tells a vivid story of being stopped cold with the realization that the short-term evangelism he was doing in Africa at age sixteen was “proclaiming with my dirt-bike arrival the miraculous power of gasoline, electricity and video technology.” (pp.80-82)

Shane reports his grandfather’s story of driving his truckload of on-fire hay bales so fast and wildly that it spread fires across eastern Tennessee. Lesson: “We are to be fire, to weave our lives together so the Spirit’s inferno of love spreads across the earth. Ultimately, that’s what it means to become the answer to our prayers.” (pp. 106-7)

Perhaps my favorite Jonathan-Shane story (out of many in this book) describes the origins of Christian Healthcare Ministries. About twenty years ago, the minister of a church of a few hundred people had an accident. He didn’t have an insurance policy, so church members pooled money to cover his medical bills. It worked so well that the pastor proposed they share to help one another, not just him. The plan expanded beyond the congregation. Since it began, CHM has received and disbursed over \$400 million dollars to about 20,000 participants in this newsletter-based Christian mutual aid arrangement which includes Shane and Jonathan.

There is much to enjoy in Becoming the Answer to Our Prayers.



Commitment: A Continuing Act of Faith

Plow Creek News

By Rich Foss

Plow Creek is a magical place. Yesterday morning snow that had been hanging around for weeks on the Common Building roof and the rest of Plow Creek had vanished.

This afternoon I heard children's voices and a knock on the door. "Come in," yours truly yelled. In came Helen and Margaret Moore and Gabrien Graham. Gabrien was carrying a broom. "Would you like us to do some sweeping?" I wasn't sure what needed sweeping, so I offered them candy. After they had the candy they said, "We usually ask for candy after we're done sweeping."

The week that Plow Creek hosted the January SMC Coordinators meeting I was wiped out by a nose-bleed. Prior to that week I could not have imagined such a thing. But it did give me a reason to sit in my chair and watch SMCers going in and out of the Common Building, and also to give thanks for Rick Reha who has been Plow Creek's faithful representative to the Coordinators for many years. Sarah and I were honored to host David Janzen.

In January Steve Graham fell off a

roof while doing work for Doctor Network, a Plow Creek Fellowship business that provides rural broadband access via satellite or ground-based wireless methods, and computer networking. He was on a snowy roof when suddenly he realized he was off the roof and sliding head first down the porch roof. He grabbed the roof gutter enough to make sure he didn't land on his head. He broke off the top of his femur. A surgeon put in a pin, and we are praying that he is one of the 60% who have the procedure done for whom it works well.

Over the past decade or so Plow Creek Farm has changed from a Plow Creek Fellowship business that mostly employed Fellowship members to a business that is managed by, and mostly employs people, who are not part of the Fellowship. A few folks from the Fellowship have begun meeting with the farm team to assist as they move from a farm manager model to a shared management model. Please pray for the farm team during this transition. The farm team is also planning a farm internship for this summer. Check the Plow Creek Farm website for more news about the farm.



Last summer Plow Creek Fellowship had four summer interns. The Fellowship is discussing the possibility of having an internship starting in September and running for a year.

In January, Paul and Heather Munn had a retreat with a Jesuit priest from Chicago who heads up a similar retreat ministry for people in recovery. They have a retreat scheduled in February for pastors who serve poor neighborhoods in Chicago.

Heather Munn has interest from a publisher in the novel that she and her mother co-wrote. Before committing to the novel, the publisher has asked for a rewrite, and Heather is deep in the rewrite.

We haven't made any further progress on selecting another elder or two in the church. In the fullness of time...

Anni Moore led a great Three Kings Day celebration, the annual worship event where we exchange gifts.

We are still amazed that we hosted 800 people last June for PAPA Fest.

And now to important social news. On February 1 Lynn Reha hosted a "round party" in honor of Erin Kindy Mucu's 30th birthday, inviting all the women of Plow Creek. The party featured an hour of singing rounds. And on January 29th Rich Foss hosted a pinochle dinner party for Carlos and Erin Mucu and Martin Graham; Erin brought the dinner, a Mexican dish with a great, new hot sauce recipe.

And that's the news from Plow Creek "where all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average." □



Barbara Bridgewater enjoyed her morning of wood stacking during the SMC Coordinators' Gathering at Plow Creek in January.

(Continued from Page 2)

The second stage of commitment is a gift that comes when persons who have seen the imperfections of their community (and perhaps several other communities) are, nevertheless, given a measure of peace about making a commitment. Usually this will involve a novice year or two for the applicant to test his or her questions and come to believe, along with the community, that this is what God wants. Sometimes it will involve beginning a new community with fellow pioneers under God's leading.

Covenant-making is a practical way to say "yes" to Jesus with one's whole life, having counted the cost and, nevertheless, trusting that God's help and the support of sisters and brothers will be sufficient for the journey.

The third stage points to the difference between "saying the truth" and "doing the truth." The moment of covenant, like the marriage vow, is worthy of celebration. But "doing the truth" involves a lifetime of learning to love beyond our human inclinations as we call on God's help to remain true. The capacity to live in committed love over time is a gift that God gives to those who keep asking.

Love and freedom—renewing our vows: It is especially important for long-term community members to revisit their vow to community and keep discerning with others how they are actively working to carrying out this commitment.

Covenant renewal can happen when a new person takes membership vows, when we celebrate a wedding or a commitment to some service. Covenant renewal ceremonies are necessary, but they are not a substitute for the inner work of examining our hearts—being honest with what we really desire and asking God to renew our love.

The word "Mission" in Shalom Mission Communities means we are committed **to stay or to be sent** according to God's calling as discerned with the sisters and brothers of our spiritual family. Pioneering energy that God gives can launch new ministries, communities, or send us to other groups where our gifts can serve God better.

Healthy community, friendships, marriages or other commitments must be free and voluntary in order for us to give ourselves completely. Integrating love

and freedom is spiritual work, but even more, it is the work of the Holy Spirit who loves in us and sets us free to love with abandon, fully alive in Christ. This is the path of intimacy with God and those whom God brings into our lives.

What about our passions and joys? I (David) have talked with young people who are wary of commitment because they imagine they will be stuck in a place where there is no further dynamic, where nothing changes because the covenant does not change. They think of those passions and talents that have been part of their life, the joys that tell them something about who they are. Does commitment mean giving these up?

There is a distinction between the things we like to do that make us happy, which we may need to sacrifice, and a deeper calling that God has for us, which we are meant to fulfill. It is important for a person to consider what is God's call beyond simply joining a community. Some communities will not be conducive to that God-given calling. Such discernments take time, prayer, and counsel with persons whose lives show the signs of God's leading in faithful commitments. We can trust that God has a better plan than we do for how the things we enjoy doing and our deeper calling will become fruitful in the kingdom of God.

When Joanne and I made our commitment to New Creation Fellowship in the early 70's, we had just returned from two years in the Congo with the Mennonite Central Committee and had enjoyed visiting the high tourist spots of Egypt, Greece, Italy, Paris, Amsterdam, London, etc. on our way. We loved to travel—or at least I did, and Joanne came along with me to share the joy. When we joined Christian community I was convicted that this love for travel should be laid on the altar, that we were called "to strive first for the kingdom of God" in the way of community with shared finances and shared decision-making, trusting Jesus' words that "all these things will be given to you as well."

Now, after 37 years, I look back and ask what happened to that passion and facility for travel? Since then, I



One of the highlights of the Sojo Epiphany Celebration is the reading of "The Traditional Epiphany Clam," a story written and read by Mike Creeger who assembles candy to accompany the story. (Yeah, sounds strange, but a great yrasitipm nonetheless!)

don't think I have ever crossed a border as a tourist, but I have been to El Salvador a dozen times with dozens of young people. God has sent me to India, Mexico, Guatemala, Spain, Canada, and countless other places for kingdom-of-God purposes, supported by my sisters and brothers in community. I have visited dozens of Christian intentional communities to give and receive counsel. And I have been changed. I don't miss being a tourist. I now love making connections with God's prophetic and courageous people who also are "seeking first the kingdom of God and God's justice." I rejoice in the truth of Jesus' words, "Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground and dies, it can not bear much fruit."

Our community covenant is the ground in which a secure love can grow and become fruitful in the garden of the church and for those who are not yet friends of Jesus. Full community is a witness to the fullness of God's love for us in Jesus. It is a testimony to the comprehensive plan of God's kingdom to overcome all the powers that alienate and enslave the peoples of this earth. Commitment is our seed, community the soil, but it is God who gives the sun, the rain and the fruit which will last for eternity.

(Continued from Page 7)

As I reflect on my journey to Plow Creek, I see that making the kind of commitment Sarah and I made comes from brashness. We both, separately, came to the conclusion that God had called us to Plow Creek. Our commitment flowed from the brash conclusion that God was calling us to committing ourselves to a sharing life with small group of people in rural Illinois.

Remaining faithful to our commitments has been an exercise in humility. Last week a sister shared with me that the way I had responded to her personal sharing had been hurtful to her. As I listened to her I had to agree. I had responded poorly.

During the 1990's we went through a long, slow train wreck at Plow Creek when one of our founders disclosed a history of sexual misconduct. As Sarah aptly said at the time, "It was like an explosion going off in the middle of members meeting. We looked at each other and said, 'Who are these people?'" No one at Plow Creek was feeling brash during those years. Our commitment to each other survived through humility.

Towards the end of that dark period of Plow Creek history, I was on retreat meditating on one of Paul's letters. I was reading his description of what God accomplished through the cross when I sensed the Lord saying to me, "Richard, by the laws of God and man, Plow Creek should have been destroyed, but I overcame the laws of God and man through the cross to save Plow Creek."

I write a column for Tiskilwa's weekly paper, the *Bureau Valley Chef*. Recently I wrote a column about Plow Creek and commitment. Here's my conclusion to the column:

Some times we are less than perfect at making and keeping our commitments. Plow Creek continues to exist after 37 years, not because we have perfectly kept all our commitments, but because we have kept most of them and forgiven each other for the rest.

Ah, the brashness and humility of commitments. □



SMC Coordinators hard at work preparing the schedule for next year?

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