

South of the Garden

The Newsletter for the Resource Center for Women and Ministry in the South

Volume 25, Number 4

January, 2005

Winter

By Jeanette Stokes

I spent Christmas Eve at my local church in Chapel Hill. As I sat down on one of the new red upholstered chairs, I greeted the woman next to me and mentioned having just seen her lovely grown daughter. "I wish I had," she responded. Oh, right—divided families. The daughter was visiting her father in Durham. The mom lives in Chapel Hill.

As we sang carols, I thought of the divided places in my own life and felt sad. No, more than sad, gypped. Why couldn't we have peace on earth and peace in our homes just *one* Christmas? It had been a pretty rough fall.

The election in November had been disheartening and had left ongoing questions about election fraud, lost ballots, and questionable voting machines. Ahead of us are four more years of an administration that seems determined to continue an unjust war, whittle away at the Bill of Rights, further erode reproductive rights, appoint right wing activist judges, open forests everywhere to logging, drill for oil in the Arctic wildlife refuge, gut the few remaining social programs, and dismantle Social Security. I was feeling pretty glum.

On December 1, I learned that CBS and NBC networks had refused to run a 30-second television ad from the United Church of Christ because its all-inclusive welcome was deemed "too controversial." It made me so mad that I called the UCC press contact for details, called the local TV network affiliates, and emailed everyone I could think of. The ad showed people being turned away from the church, some of whom might have been gay or lesbian couples.

"Because this commercial touches on the exclusion of gay couples and other minority groups by other individuals and organizations," reads an explanation from CBS, "and the fact the Executive Branch has recently proposed a Constitutional Amendment to define marriage as a union between a man and a woman, this spot is unacceptable for broadcast on the [CBS and UPN] networks."

The ad said nothing about same-sex marriage. I concluded that the major networks were either scared by or under the control of the current administration and that the administration's agenda would repeatedly influence network policy.

As it turned out, the UCC received more publicity from the controversy than they ever would have from the ad campaign. National UCC figures were heard and seen on TV, radio, newspapers and magazines. Some UCC congregations report an increase in calls and visitors.

The controversy over the UCC ad sounded like another controversy closer to home. In October, WUNC, a public radio station in Chapel Hill, refused to run an underwriting announcement from Ipas, an international reproductive health organization. WUNC had run the announcement earlier in the year but decided the word "rights" constituted advocacy, which violated guidelines for these sponsor slots.

The ad read, "Ipas, a Chapel Hill-based nonprofit that

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Catholic Worker

Nancy

By Jeanette Stokes

The following are my edited remarks for two memorial services for Nancy Peeler Keppel, one in Blacksburg, VA, December 14, 2004 and one at Nancy's home church, Community United Church of Christ, Raleigh, NC, January 22, 2005.

We are gathered here today to celebrate the life and grieve the loss of our mother, sister, friend, and best cheerleader, Nancy Peeler Keppel.

St. John Chrysostom says,

Know that she whom we love and lose is no longer where she was before. She is now wherever we are.

I met Nancy in 1980 when Carol Bernard Snyder arranged for us to share a room at a national United Church of Christ (UCC) women's meeting. The first time I laid eyes on her was at the Greensboro airport as we all prepared to fly off to the meeting. I was almost 30, she was 50. I wondered who this short, outspoken, unusual, older woman was.

In the 1980s, Nancy and I served together on the North Carolina Council of Churches Committee for the Equal Rights Amendment. She had been instrumental in the formation of the Task Force for Women in Church and Society of the Southern Conference of the UCC. She served on the Board of the Resource Center for Women and Ministry in the South. I came to love Nancy like a sister and struggle with her as a friend. She would go on and on about people I did not know and I'd have to stop her and say, "Slow down. Whom are you talking about?"

In the last couple of years, Nancy and I edited a book together, a collection of essays by UCC clergywomen called *God Speaks, Women Respond*. We talked on the phone every few days. I came to know Nancy's deep faith in God as we struggled with publishers and as she weathered her cancer treatments with grace and humor. She heard God's call and saw God's hand everywhere in her life. She was a tireless worker for justice for women, for gay and lesbian people, for the poor, and for the world. She was sturdy. She never lost her appetite or ability to sleep or interest in Duke Basketball until the very end. When her doctor told her that cancer patients who fell in love and ate chocolate got along better, she said she'd be happy to oblige.

Nancy made things happen in the world by pushing. She would call me up and tell me what to do. I'd take a deep breath and usually do it. I would not call her critical, but she had an idea about how to improve almost anything. The only argument I ever won with her was over the color of the cover of our book. She wanted it to be red and stand out! I wanted it to be blue and pretty. When she gave in, I was stunned. I will never know how she came to the decision. I took it as a gift she gave me.

The numbers of people who were touched by Nancy are legion. I spoke to one, Mary Emma Evans, shortly after Nancy died. Mary Emma is a pastor and gospel singer in North Carolina whom Nancy helped write a chapter for the book and also helped to produce a musical CD. Mary Emma was singing "Beulah Land" at the top of her lungs to an audience of several hundred people in North Carolina at the moment Nancy died. She said a spirit

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Calendar

January 29, 2005, 1:00–5:00 pm
BRIGIT: TENDING THE FIRE IN OUR HEARTS
Durham, NC

On February 2, torches all over Ireland light the way for the goddess Brigit to emerge from the dark wintry Earth. She quickens the seeds in our hearts and those in the ground. Goddess of healing, poetry, the arts, she calls to our natural ability to heal and create. Heed her call! Come hear her stories, make art, create a ceremony. Let your heart-fire be lit!

Leaders: Mary Love May & Jeanette Stokes

Sponsor: RCWMS

Cost: \$35

Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, rcwmsnc@aol.com

February 8, 2005, 11:00 am–6:00 pm
LABYRINTH WALK AT DUKE CHAPEL
Duke Chapel, Duke University, Durham, NC

Free and open to the public

Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236 or rcwmsnc@aol.com

February 11–13, 2005

THE UNIMAGINABLE HAS HAPPENED!

Windsong Retreat Center, near Pittsboro, NC

Use Biblical and modern stories, writing, and silence to reflect on healing in relationships in this lenten retreat.

Leaders: Carol Eckerman & Jeannene Wiseman

Cost: \$220 (includes room & meals; some scholarships)

Contact: jeanneneww@earthlink.net, 919-469-3194

February 21–March 14, 2005 (4 Mondays, 4:00–6:00 pm)
THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS OF DEATH & DYING
Holy Ground, Asheville, NC

Consider the ways our approach to death and dying is linked to our approach to living.

Leader: Dorri Sherrill, hospital chaplain

Sponsor: Holy Ground

Cost: \$85

Contact: 828-236-0222, www.holygroundretreats.org

February 26–27, 2005

WEEKEND WITH MARVIN ELLISON

United Church of Chapel Hill, NC

Speaker: Marvin Ellison, Bangor Theological Seminary

Saturday retreat, Sunday preaching (8:45 and 11:00 am)

February 28–March 2, 2005

AT THE WELL: SEMINAR FOR WOMEN IN MINISTRY

Union Theological Seminary-PSCE, Richmond, VA

Leaders: Susan Andrews, Moderator, PCUSA; Beverly Zink-Sawyer, Union-PSCE; Drema McAllister-Wilson, Wesley Seminary

Cost: \$150

Contact: www.union-psce.edu/prodev/index.shtml

March 1–2, 2005

MIRIAM, MARY AND MARY MAGDALENE IN

ART, LITERATURE AND MUSIC—FEMINIST

PERSPECTIVES, Phyllis Tribble Lecture Series

Divinity School, Wake Forest Univ., Winston-Salem, NC

Speakers: Phyllis Tribble, Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, Mary Foskett, & Dierdre Good

Contact: www.wfu.edu/divinity/tribble-lectures.html

March 3, 2005 (Walks 4:30 & 7:00 pm, potluck 6:00 pm)

WOMEN'S LABYRINTH WALK & POTLUCK

Groce UMC, Asheville, NC

Leader: Jeanette Stokes

Cost: \$15

Contact: 828-236-0222, www.holygroundretreats.org

March 20–25, 2005

HOLY WEEK LABYRINTH WALK

Binkley Baptist Church, Chapel Hill, NC

Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, rcwmsnc@aol.com



Catholic Worker

March 31–April 3, 2005

INHERITING THE PROMISE, LIVING THE CALL:

National Association of Presbyterian Clergywomen

Princeton, NJ

Event inaugurates a year celebrating women in ministry.

Contact: Janet MacGregor-Williams, 973-728-3081

April 12–13, 2005

MEDITATION & THE ENNEAGRAM

For those with extensive work with their Enneagram type and a desire to have a daily spiritual practice.

Leader: Helen Palmer, international Enneagram teacher

Cost and location to be announced.

Contact: 828-236-0222, www.holygroundretreats.org

April 13–15, 2005

RECEIVING & RESTING IN THE SILENCE

A silent retreat following the Helen Palmer workshop.

Sponsor: Holy Ground

Cost and location to be announced.

Contact: 828-236-0222, www.holygroundretreats.org

April 20, 2005, 6:30–8:30 pm

WOMEN'S FREEDOM SEDER

YWCA, Asheville, NC

This seder, open to women of all faiths, will focus on

women's lives. Participants will prepare specific dishes.

Sponsor: Holy Ground

Cost: \$15

Contact: 828-236-0222, www.holygroundretreats.org

April 23, 2005, 9:30 am–4:00 pm

WOMEN OVER SIXTY

Durham, NC

A day for women over 60 to speak of our experiences,

learn from each other, share our challenges, compost

valuable lessons life has taught us, and name future

possibilities we hardly recognize.

Leaders: Anita McLeod

Sponsor: RCWMS

Cost: \$45

Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, rcwmsnc@aol.com

April 24–29, 2005

THE PAINTING EXPERIENCE

Kanuga Retreat Center, near Asheville, NC

Don't think, just paint. Paint your heart out in an

environment of artistic freedom with great support.

Leader: Stewart Cubley

Cost: \$850-950, includes room and food

Contact: 888-639-8569, www.processarts.com

May 6–13, 2005

A WEEK OF QUIET AND WRITING

Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC

Unstructured week of writing at the beach for women.

Sponsor: RCWMS

Cost: about \$500, includes room and meals

Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, rcwmsnc@aol.com

June 10–12, 2005

A RETREAT AT THE BEACH

Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC

Leader: Julia Scatliff-O'Grady

Sponsor: RCWMS

Cost: \$260 double, \$295 single, includes room and meals

Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, rcwmsnc@aol.com

September 31–October 7, 2005

A WEEK OF QUIET AND WRITING

Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC

Unstructured week of writing at the beach for women.

Sponsor: RCWMS

Cost: about \$500, includes room and meals

Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, rcwmsnc@aol.com

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Hidden Fear

By Sharon Paver

The woman I love is tall and has great legs. The depth of her eyes invites me in. The far reaches of her mind offer places to investigate and explore together the meanings of life and love. After nineteen years together, not without significant conflict, again and again we fall in love to the tune of undying hope, promises to be lived, commitment to grow by, the endless possibilities with joy in one another and the many blessings of life. Here's to the adventure we are so fortunate to be living!

And yet I am afraid. I am ordained. I am lesbian. I am hidden. I sit in a room with scores of clergy and their bishops and listen while the debate ensues. Is homosexuality a doctrinal or a moral matter? I watch while they struggle to decide whether they have the right to cut me out of their community. Many of them love me and respect my work. Many of them are my friends. But they do not know. Do they? I am afraid of what my colleagues can do to me.

I have served as a leader in the church for over twenty years. I have worked with children, youth, adults, couples, groups. I love my work. God has blessed me with gifts and talents. My ministry is strong, faithful, ever challenging. And I am watching while many who sit in the pew are struggling with whether or not homosexuals might be accepted by God. Some of you are willing to say yes. Some of you say "as long as it's not my priest." Some of you are using your money now to say "no" to a church that is willing to bless same gender unions and ordain homosexuals. Where will all of this lead? While you speak with your money and the budget suffers my salary is threatened. I am afraid of what you, my friends and my community, can do to me. The fabric of the church is woven, ripped and torn, and rewoven again and again through centuries of use and misuse.

Though I was raised in the church I did not really embrace a personal relationship with God before I was nearly thirty years old. My relationship with the Holy Spirit brings me a blessed assurance, which breeds peace of heart and mind in the midst of struggle. Jesus says to me, "I do not condemn you." But rather than following that remark with the words "go and sin no more," He says "I celebrate you!" The life of Jesus reminds me of the constant struggle between a journey of faith and the rigidity of the institution. I am not afraid of what God will do with me! I can separate God from this institution called the church. But I am finding this tension we now have in the church difficult to endure.

Perhaps the tension is a part of my passion? But mostly my passion is the joy of my work with people. The human heart and soul and mind call out to me and ask to be seen and heard and understood. And I revel in the opportunity to offer such seeing and hearing and understanding. And I learn from others. I journey with my human kin feeling fully alive and inspired as I witness the work of God in human life and in our world. That's really what I live for, where my passion lies—in those transcending experiences of divine presence which enable us to encounter truth and love in life. These are the springs of joy and hope that constantly revive me.

I can almost always be comforted by the life-giving nature of my passion. But when I am afraid I do get stuck sometimes. That's when I have to call certain people and ask them to remind me of who I am. "Tell me it won't always be like this." And I breathe deeply as I listen to the reply: "It won't always feel this way, I promise."

I think of the "Philadelphia Eleven"—the first eleven women to be ordained in the Episcopal Church in the



seventies. And of Gene Robinson, a gay man-priest who has now become bishop in that church. Where did they get such courage? How could they/can he endure the shouts and threats and the public eye focused so intently and harshly upon them? Deep in my heart I know that I want you to see me fully. But I am so afraid of that as well. Because that seeing will bring judgment. Some will show me how angry they are. Some will simply write me off, cut me out of their lives. Many will do or say nothing. Some will try to get me fired or have me removed from the priesthood. Some will want to discredit my work. Some will be suspicious of me because if I could hide this matter, what else might I be hiding? What kind of person could I be anyway? Those of you in my church will harass the leadership there, blame them and challenge them because they have allowed such a person to be in leadership. The fabric will tear and have to be mended. What will the damage do to all of us? How long will it take to be repaired? And even if that happens within my lifetime, what will that tear look like in years to come? Will it be mended well?

The human heart and soul and mind call out to me and ask to be seen and heard and understood. And I revel in the opportunity to offer such seeing and hearing and understanding. And I learn from others. I so wish to see you and hear you and understand you. And I have the energy and compassion to offer that to you. I suppose I have developed it well because it is what I need myself more than anything in the world. Can you find a way to give it to me without destroying lives or tearing apart the fabric of the church?

There are many issues in all of our lives that remain unconfrosted. I do take comfort in this! I have found a wonderful place out of which to operate. Each day I offer myself, my soul and body, to the passion which gets me out of bed in the morning and sustains me throughout busy days. I struggle to make meaning, to keep my head above water, to have integrity of being. And I am faithful as best as I can be. But I know. I know about these unconfrosted issues in my life that are calling out for resolution. A part of the resolution is mine to find. A part of it is yours to offer me. And while each of us struggles to find and enact our own part, all of us live in the tension.

This essay won an honorable mention in the Resource Center's 2003 Essay Contest. Sharon Paver lives in the Triangle and has worked for the church for over 20 years, 12 of those years in ordained ministry.

Calendar...

October 7-9, 2005
TARA MEDITATION RETREAT
Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC
Leader: Rachael Wooten
Sponsor: RCWMS
Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, rcwmsnc@aol.com

October 20-23, 2005
THE LABYRINTH SOCIETY ANNUAL GATHERING
Lenox, MA

December 2-4, 2005
THE SOUNDS OF SILENCE, A silent Retreat for Women
Near Morehead City, NC
Leader: Jeanette Stokes
Sponsor: RCWMS
Cost: \$230 double, \$270 single, includes room and meals
Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, rcwmsnc@aol.com

Winter...

protects women's reproductive health and rights at home and abroad. More information available at www.ipas.org. Ipas would not take out the word "rights" and pulled its underwriting support.

So now we can't say "reproductive rights" out loud? Sex education, family planning, and good gynecological care are all part of reproductive rights.

On December 2, the Rev. Beth Stroud was defrocked by The United Methodist Church. The lesbian clergywoman in Pennsylvania was found guilty of "engaging in practices that are incompatible with Christian teachings." The motto of the UMC is "Open hearts. Open minds. Open doors." One might ask, "Open to whom?"

Then in early December, I learned that my friend and colleague Nancy Peeler Keppel was nearing the end of her life. Nancy had helped to fund our writing programs over the last three years. She and I had edited a book together that was published in 2004. She was a remarkable woman and you can read more about her elsewhere in this newsletter. I made one last visit to Nancy on December 10, and she died on December 12.

Compared with the fall, I thought the winter holidays, even with all their activity, were going to be a welcome break, and they were for me personally. I enjoyed writing every morning but Christmas and New Year's Day. But on the morning after Christmas, we all woke to the news that southern Asia had been devastated by an earthquake under the Indian Ocean and a tsunami that had killed thousands. As the weeks have passed the death toll has risen above 150,000. Religious organizations, governments, and aid organizations around the world have sent money, supplies, and workers to help in the aftermath.

A right-wing administration in Washington, the rights of LGBT people being challenged in the church and in the media, a natural disaster of staggering proportions. It was a lot to hold.

As I sat in my red chair on Christmas Eve, I considered the difficult fall. (The tsunami was yet to come.) I held a lighted candle before me and began to wonder. What better place to bring my own sadness and the brokenness of the world than to a God who would consider appearing in the world as a helpless child? Perhaps such a child, or his mother, could hold all that is not right with the world. What better place to take our brokenness than to a community of people who would pause for a moment at the darkest time of the year and announce the return of the light. What? I had thought life would be simple, easy, without complications? No. This is the life we are given, with its joys and sorrows that come all at once. This is the life we are fortunate enough to live.

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Catholic Worker

Nancy...

filled that hall like she had never felt before. Mary Emma said, "Nancy helped me so much. She couldn't have encouraged and supported anyone more than me." The truth is that there are scores of people like Mary Emma around the country whom Nancy enabled to be and do more than they thought they could.

Nancy gave her energy, her love, and her insistent encouragement to her projects, to her beloved United Church of Christ, and to her family. Her children Tim, Ken, and Jane were her finest accomplishment. She loved them. She tried to boss them around. She was so proud of them. She talked about them to anyone who would listen. She was so amazed by them.

Her grandchildren were her great joy. These girls and boys were the sweetest gifts in her life. Oh how she loved to see them! What more could any human being ask than to be surrounded at the moment of death by children, grandchildren, and friends. What more could any person ask than to be remembered by such people.

The poet Kahlil Gibran has written,
Close your eyes and you will see me among you now and always. Go back to your homes and you will find there what death could not take away from you and from me.

Nancy told her daughter Jane that she, Nancy, would be watching her. Nancy's energy is still with us, asking questions, being impatient, pushing us along, making us better than we thought we could be.

In "When Death Comes," Mary Oliver has written:

*When death comes
like the hungry bear in autumn;
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse
to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;*

*.....
I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?
.....*

*When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.*

*When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.
I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.*

Nancy Peeler Keppel did more than just visit this world. She lived her life in amazement and wonder, grateful to God for each and every day of it until the last.

For the sweet blessing of Nancy's presence among us, for the gracious God who created her and now holds her in loving arms, and for each person here, we give thanks and praise. Amen.



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