What comes to mind when you think of a Messenger of Good News. Chances are whatever your image is, it’s of someone else and not you! Why do you suppose it’s so hard for many of us to ask for help, accept praise and affirmation from others, and yes, see ourselves as messengers of good news!

This issue of Common Lot is traditionally known as the Women’s Week issue and the majority of what you will find in these pages relates to the 2006 Women’s Week, either the Sunday morning worship or the daily meditations prepared for the observance of Women’s Week. This is a time each year when we have the opportunity to celebrate and affirm the leadership of women in our local churches. This year’s theme is titled Messenger of Good News, and certainly among God’s faithful children, women have been some of our most outstanding messengers of good news!

The Bible is filled with many women who were messengers of good news from Miriam to Mary. In today’s gospel lesson from Mark we read about a woman known only as Simon’s mother-in-law. In this private healing at Simon’s home Jesus restores this woman so she may then go and minister to others. The Greek word for serve, diaconeo, while often translated in English as “to serve” can also be translated as “to minister”.

In the daily meditations in this issue you will find a variety of messengers of good news — including a seeing eye dog! Take a moment and think about some of the messengers or ministers who have ministered to you, moving you from brokenness to empowerment, allowing you to continue the cycle of service to others; thereby being a messenger of good new in the lives of those around you!

As you ponder the daily meditations and reflection questions in this issue consider what the traits are of those messengers who minister to us. What’s the call of a messenger, more importantly what calls us to provide good news to those we encounter along the way!
God has richly blessed each of us and through the daily use of the Women’s Blessing Boxes we find our blessings multiply as we continue to recognize more and more blessings in our lives.

As we recognize our blessings we keep God present in our daily lives!

Gratitude is how we respond to God’s blessings and gifts. Gratitude is recognizing those gifts that come from God and sharing what we have received. As we are blessed let us also bless others!

We are a blessed people. God’s love and grace are at the core of our blessings. Women and children in the countries listed below have the opportunity to be primary beneficiaries of the many blessing we claim in our lives, so share God’s blessing in a very tangible way in the world:

Liberia
The Balkans
Afghanistan
Hong Kong
Dominican Republic
South Korea
India
Niger
• Involve many women in worship leadership. Invite them to wear brightly colored attire, and special stoles or scarves.

• Cover the communion table with creative, colorful fabrics. Decorate the table with fresh grapes of different colors and variously shaped loaves of bread.

• Use additional candles.

Sermon time:
• The daily devotions and questions posed therein might provide some sermon starters.
• Ask a panel of women to share stories about receiving healing and hope... or ways in which they have been the visionary or the voice of hope for someone else.
• Ask a woman to share her faith journey. (See “focus” questions, below)

Focus Questions for Faith Journey Sharing
1. Church background / early memories / significant people (especially those who have been agents of healing and hope)
2. Turning points in your life / faith experience
3. How your faith helps you with your life (your work, your raising of children, other relationships, difficult life passages or tragedies)
4. How and why you give of yourself to others
5. The rewards of being a Christian and a regular participant in the life of your faith community
6. Faith questions that you struggle with... or have found answers to!

These are just some suggestions to help you think. As you make notes, you will find that you have ample material from which to distill a 15 to 20 minute statement. THANK YOU for being willing to share yourself!

Resources
The communion service includes elements published in Touch Holiness, eds. Ruth C. Duck and Maren C. Tirabassi,
United Church Press
Book of Worship, United Church of Christ
Imaging the Word, vol 3 (United Church Press) is a good source of art, prayers and quotes relating to the texts for the day.
Anthem selection: Marty Haugen’s new collection, “Turn My Heart,” available through GIA, includes “Turn My Heart, O God” and “Healer of Our Every Ill.”
Responsive Psalm readings in the New Century Hymnal
Women’s Week 2006

WORSHIP SERVICE TO CELEBRATE WOMEN’S WEEK / WORSHIP RESOURCES

Theme: “Vision of Healing, Voice of Hope”

Introduction: Women’s Week in the United Church of Christ is an occasion to honor and celebrate the gifts and contributions of faithful women in the life of the church. This year’s theme, “Vision of Healing, Voice of Hope,” ties together the lectionary texts for this Sunday. We invite you to use this opportunity to highlight the extraordinary ability of women to offer healing and hope to others as messengers of the good news and to explore ways of living this good news in your community.

Prelude
A Moment for Personal Reflection

GATHERING...in the presence of God, Source of healing and hope

Responsive Call to Worship (adapted from Psalm 147)
Leader: Sing praise to God; it is good to sing praises.
People: Sing out to our God, who can do the impossible, Who can rebuild the community that was thought to be utterly devastated.
Leader: Sing out to our gracious Creator, who can connect the lost and disenfranchised into deep and nurturing relationships.
People: This Healer can restore those with shattered centers. This One who brings hope can bandage our wounds.
Leader: Sing praises to our God, who knows and understands the full extent of our lives. Sing praises to our God, whose strength can become a resource for us.

Prayer of Invocation (in unison)
O God, become our healer, our strength, our nurturer. Lift us where we have fallen. Wash over us with new hope. Inspire us with new possibilities And build a hedge of protection around us. Amen.

Parting Hymn: “O Holy God, Whose Gracious Power” (#535 NCH)
Commissioning (adapted from Mark 1:38)

Leader: Let us go forth from this place to extend healing and hope to others as messengers of God’s good news. For that is what we are called to do.

Benediction
Leader: May God become our healer, strength and nurturer, Lift us where we have fallen, Wash over us with new hope, Inspire us with new possibilities And build a hedge of protection around us, this day and for ever. Amen.

Postlude
Prayer of Confession (unison): Loving and merciful God, our lives do not always reflect the praise we sing to you. We confess that we often forget that you are the source of our power and strength. Forgive us...for coming to you as a last resort...for believing we are self-sufficient... for failing to be compassionate messengers of your healing and hope. We confess that we are so mired in our own limitations that we do not trust your future. Forgive our blindness to your grace. Restore hope in us, as we humbly offer ourselves to you, in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Words of Assurance (adapted from Isaiah 40:28–29)
Leader: Have you not known, have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. God does not faint or grow weary. God gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless.
Congregational Praise Response: NCH #775 “And God will raise you up...”

LISTENING...for the vision of healing

Scripture Readings: 1 Corinthians 9:16–23
Mark 1:29–39

Children’s Time
Anthem
Sermon / Faith Journey

RESPONDING...with the voice of hope

Responsive Affirmation of Faith
Leader: You give us a Vision of Healing and a Voice of Hope to DREAM of relationships that are healthy, life-affirming and just.

People: We act with Dignity, affirming the intrinsic worth of all who are created by God in God’s image.
Leader: You give us a Vision of Healing to see how You empower us with the spiritual gifts to do what You call us to do.

People: We act with Respect, honoring the spiritual gifts within each of us with honesty and curiosity.
Leader: You give us a Vision of Healing to see how You weave us together, each a part of one another.

People: We act with Empathy, communicating compassion and caring in all of our relationships.
Leader: You give us a Voice of Hope to speak out for those who have been silenced.

People: We act with Acceptance, affirming our diversity, including our uniqueness, and uplifting our connections.
Leader: You give us a Voice of Hope to speak out for justice and shared power.

People: We act with Mutuality, embracing each other in community as equal partners in Christ.

ALL: You give us a Vision of Healing and a Voice of Hope to DREAM of relationships that are healthy, life-affirming and just.

Hymn Response: “God, Speak to Me” (NCH #531, The Hymnal #256, PH#397)

Prayers

Offering

Prayer of Dedication (unison): O God, may our offerings represent our desire to be your vision of healing and voice of hope in the world.
Bless these gifts and us as we offer ourselves to you. Amen.

Service of Holy Communion

Responsive Invitation
Leader: Let us give thanks!
People: Our God has bent down and fed us!
Leader: Like a mother, God has held us,
People: Our God has calmed and quieted our fear!
Leader: Like a father, God has forgiven us,
People: And removed our sins from us!
Leader: Bless God’s holy name!
People: And forget not all God’s benefits!

Responsive Communion Prayer
Pastor: We dream, O God, of community, but in waking hours we forget such hopes. Our dreams we call “alien;” our sister and brother we call “stranger.”

People: You call us by name.
With arms outstretched as on a cross, you call us to yourself, and you name us your own people.

Pastor: So with arms outstretched, we now embrace new friends and forgotten dreams. The body broken and lifeblood poured transform our fears, revive our visions.

People: Renew us, O God, with your Spirit, that we may receive this mystery of our body, embracing its manifold gifts and needs, shouting an “Amen?” that resounds through our world.
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| Stars | In Isaiah, we learn that God has everything in control. We can’t keep track of all of the stars in the sky, but God can! That means that God can keep track of each one of us. God hears our prayers even when it seems like there are too many other people’s prayers for God to hear. None of the stars are ever missing!  
*Take home message:* No matter how big the world is, God has it all under control! |
| Junk Food, Milk and Veggies | If we eat junk food all the time, what will happen to us? Right! We’ll be unhealthy!  
What happens when we eat vegetables and drink milk? We grow strong and healthy!  
Well, it’s just the same with God. The more we do that God wants us to do, like pray and read the Bible, we will grow strong. When we don’t do what God wants us to do, we become tired and grumpy.  
*Take home message:* God’s way of living will make us strong! |
| Gumball machine that requires pennies | How much does a gumball cost?  
How about a car!  
How much does God’s love cost? Free of charge!!! We are given this gift for free!!!  
How many times do we wish something was free? So, how much will it cost for our friends to learn about the Gospel? That’s right! Nothing! So, what are some ways that you can “give” the gospel for free?  
*Take home message:* The gospel is God’s free gift to us! |
| Photos of Family and Sunday School | Who is my brother and sister? We have brothers and sisters at home, but we also have them at church too! When we all believe in God, we become a new kind of brother or sister!  
*Take home message:* God’s family is united through faith. |
“THIS IS MY BODY, BROKEN FOR YOU”

I have been a medical professional for 30 years, ministering to many, and having particular interest in troubled adolescents and in women who have survived sexual and domestic violence. This isn’t just a chosen niche of interest for me. I happen to share these experiences, but until I was 50, no one really knew. Like most women who have been sexually assaulted or who are constantly barraged with verbal, physical, and emotional abuse, I never disclosed one word. I kept up a good front. Professionally I was organized, successful and dogged in my protection of my patients. But personally I felt insecure, alone, and powerless, constantly in fear of being “found out”. I did not specifically fear someone finding out about the rapes that had occurred in my adolescence or the indignities I suffered at the hands of a controlling, jealous, manipulative man; I had a deeper fear. I could not remember a time when I had not felt inadequate, stupid, dirty, guilty, and ugly. I felt like my whole life was a fraud, and I lived constantly in fear of discovery. I had been president of my high school class, nursing school class, medical school class, and suggested for chief resident of my internal medicine program. I sang, I acted, I had good grades without trying, and boys and men were constantly attracted to me; too attracted to me. I could sew and create things, I could write stories, songs and poems, but none of it ever seemed to be enough for me to feel legitimate, or validated. What happens to those of us who are abused?

Once when counseling a woman scarred by incest and family violence, I was startled by her profound declaration: “I don’t want to be damaged, broken,” She declared. “I want to be whole.” I thought long about her statement. How was it that some 80 year olds could still view life with hope and anticipation, and except for failing bodies, see themselves no less whole than they were at 35, while others could be 35 and consider themselves profoundly broken, forever damaged and view life with such despair? Apart from the physical injuries of our abuses, there seems to be a spiritual disconnect that occurs when we have been victimized. Regardless of our age, we become separated from that part of ourselves that felt whole and safe; emotionally, we are broken. For many of us, it is a lifetime before we again learn to trust or become empowered.

As a survivor of sexual and domestic violence I resonate with this sense of brokenness. I’ve lived the mistrust and I’ve wasted too much of my life in a frantic race against death, waiting to be discarded as life’s trash. But who is to define brokenness? Are we all in some ways “damaged”? Can trauma give one a special appreciation of life?

This musing reminded me of the words of the philosopher, poet, Kahlil Gibrnan: “I would not exchange the sorrows of my heart for the joys of the multitude.....I would that my life remain a tear and a smile. A tear to purify my heart and give me understanding of life’s secrets and hidden things. A smile to draw me nigh to the sons of my kind and to be a symbol of my glorification of the gods. A tear to unite me with those of broken heart; a smile to be a sign of my joy in existence.”

As Christians, we hear the words, “This is my body broken for you.” In fact we hear them so often we are at risk of forgetting just how literally Christ was “broken” for our sake. Yet the message of the sacrament is not one of sorrow, of panic, of shame or loss. The message of the crucifixion is Hope! Christ was indeed broken for us, and in allowing Himself that pain and...
suffering, He secured for us the gift of hope in eternal life, where our wounds are healed, our pain is eased, and our brokenness is restored to wholeness.

Why will some suffer more than others? One may as well ask why God made birds of different colors. There is a plan, I am sure. I am discovering every day how my brokenness opens my eyes and heightens my appreciation of this gift of life I have been given. I am learning how my gift of brokenness has afforded me opportunities to do God’s work, and view this life and the Lord’s message in unique ways. It was mankind, not God, which caused me to experience violence. But I have been blessed by the Grace of God, not only to have survived, but to have come to see my experience as one small speck in a mighty plan, God’s plan to lift up others who have been “damaged “and show them the mirror in which they will again see themselves as whole.

1. Has there been a time in your life that you have experienced a sense of brokenness? Have you shared your feeling with God through personal prayer and reflection? Can you see parallels in your life and that of those who sought Christ and were healed?

2. Have you been inspired by the resilience of someone you know who has experienced domestic or sexual violence, or have you been able to survive and thrive yourself after this kind of trauma? Have you shared your experience or insight with someone who needs to hear these words to strengthen her and help her cope with her own situation?

3. Have you ever found yourself guilty of victim blaming? So often, women caught in domestic violence are told they “should” or “shouldn’t” have, “could” or “couldn’t” have done certain things to prevent or alleviate their plight. But we are not walking in their shoes. We do not share their experiences, fears, or responsibilities. Who are we to judge them? This heaps more guilt and shame on our sisters who are being abused and further alienates them and makes them wonder if even God is listening. Put yourself in this position and imagine what you would need to hear to give you strength to go on.

4. Have you truly reflected on the degree of suffering and “brokenness” Christ had to endure for our sake, throughout his ministry as well as the final week of his life? Have you considered the plight of other women referenced in the bible who themselves endured rape, incest, isolation and abuse? How have they inspired you? How have they worked through God’s plan to further this greater mission? How can you continue to work through your own brokenness to lift up others to the Hope of a new life in Christ?

Dear God,

Help me always to remember that, far more than me, you have suffered indignities from mankind, for my sake. I have covered my face in shame, and tried to hide my brokenness from you. But you saw it happen, you lived it, and you bore me through it. Help me to see my scars as tools to teach and to lift up others in despair, so they may see themselves as you do, blameless and whole, as your beautiful children of grace. Help me to reflect on life’s damaging events so I may say to you, “Lord, this is my body, broken for you, use it as you may.” Amen
Psalm 147:1–11, 20c

THE NARRATIVE VOICE of Carol Shields’ novel “Unless” is a mother, Reta, whose daughter is adrift, out of touch, unreachable, having retreated deep into herself without explanation. A writer, Reta reflects on how our casual speech about happiness and sadness fails to convey the raw acuity of these actual states of being. Reta begins the story:

It happens that I am going through a period of great unhappiness and loss just now. All my life, I’ve heard people speak of finding themselves in acute pain, bankrupt in spirit and body, but I’ve never understood what they meant. To lose. To have lost. I believed these visitations of darkness lasted only a few minutes or hours and that these saddened people, in between bouts, were occupied, as we all were, with the useful monotony of happiness. But happiness is not what I thought.

In a public restroom, Reta finds herself compelled to add to the graffiti, and she spontaneously writes, “My heart is broken.”

At once I felt a release of pressure around my ribs. Something not unlike jubilation rubbed against me, just for a moment, half a moment, as though under some enchantment I was allowed to be recepteur and transmitter both, not a dead thing but a live link in the storage of what would become an unendurable grief. I believed at that instant in my own gusto, that I’d set down words of revealing truth...for the first time in weeks I was able to take a deep breath. My Heart Is Broken. My mouth closed on the words, and then I swallowed.

Musing back on life before her daughter’s estrangement, Reta describes the sea change that has occurred:

Two years ago, I inhabited another kind of life, in which I scarcely registered my notion of heartbreak, Hurt feelings, minor slights, minimal losses, small treacheries, even bad reviews – that’s what I thought sadness was made of: tragedy was someone not liking my book.

We too speak so casually about being “broken-hearted,” the word has lost much of its force. I’m told that the Hebrew word (verse 3) implies the shattering of one’s very center. And indeed the Hebrew people were shattered to the core by the loss of their land and temple, referenced in the Psalm. Perhaps we can relate to this kind of shattering as we consider the devastation suffered by those caught in the grip of Hurricane Katrina, the plight of the refugee, the estrangement of the exile, the long-term wounding inflicted by sexual and domestic violence, the horrors of modern warfare, the loss of a child. As Shields says, we do not understand the all-encompassing power of this shattering until we ourselves are afflicted.

Given the enormity and seeming finality of the Hebrews’ loss, hope must have seemed foolhardy during their exile, which spanned a period of two generations. And yet they did hope! They hoped for the safety and security of home, for rebuilding and restoration, for healing and renewal.
How could they hope, after all those years? Neither outward circumstances nor their inner life as exiles suggested that hope was a reasonable stance. Hope was possible only because God was God. Yahweh, the Creator God of the whole vast universe, cared about them, not just as part of the created order but in their particularity as a people called out and claimed by Yahweh. They were not lost in Babylon, because Yahweh continued to care for them. Ultimately, their hopes were not disappointed.

We also are not merely adrift in the wide, wide world, for the same reason: God cares about us, loves us, with this kind of particularity. As small as we are, God is interested in healing our brokenness and restoring us to wholeness of life. As we hope in God’s constant love, we will not be disappointed. Even in the most tragic circumstances, love’s healing balm can work restoration and open the way to new ways of being in the world. Thanks be to God that as people of faith we can continue to hope in God, to care, to love.

Questions for Reflection

1. What is essential to your life? What is that center without which you cannot imagine going on?

2. In what settings have you experienced the vastness of God? In what settings do you feel small, almost insignificant? Does this sense of insignificance inspire comfort or threat in you?

3. What in you might inspire pleasure for God? What in you corresponds to the “strength of the runner?” (verse 10)

4. Can you recall a time when hope was renewed in you? Describe that movement from hopelessness to restored hope. Draw a picture, or write a verse expressing this transformation.

Prayer: Bounteous God, if we are humbled by anything, it is that you continue to care for us even when we turn our backs on you intentionally, or are just too preoccupied to give ourselves wholeheartedly to you. We are so grateful for your continuing care, and we ask you to stir those remembrances of hope past in us, that in this day we may be encouraged. Through the turmoil of loss and the anguish of brokenness, let us see in faith all the consolation you intend for us. Praise be to you, O God, in Christ, Amen.
Isaiah 40:21–31

21 Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? 22 It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in; 23 who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. 24 Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows upon them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble. 25 To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One. 26 Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? He who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name; because he is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing.

27 Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, “My way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God”? 28 Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. 29 He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. 30 Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; 31 but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

IT IS A COLD WINTER night and as I gather together my numerous bags from the backseat of the car, my lunch bag falls to the cold and snowy ground. Yet another piece falling out of order. It has been another long day at work, trying to fit everything in, make all the phone calls, remember all the meetings and tasks. And as I draw nearer to my warm, soft bed, longing for the blankets to wrap themselves tightly around my body, my lunch bag on the ground reminds me of all the work that still lingers before my oh-so desired slumber. I helplessly reach down to grab it, only dropping more things out of my hands and in complete frustration, I let it all drop. Perhaps if I start over, picking it all up again, it will be a bit more organized.

But something in the still night beckons me to look up. It isn’t one of those cloudy winter nights when snow is on the horizon, instead it is a clear bright night beckoning my presence. So, I answer. In a complete release of organizational attempts and revolt against mundane activities, I flop down into the front lawn and breathe a deep sigh.

I long to wave my arms in the snow making an angel, but it seems as though even that requires to much energy. And so I just stare up at the stars, so disjointed and random. Where is the order in all of these tiny little holes to heaven? I can see no rhythm or pattern. I don’t understand the rationale behind these strange specks of light. I long for all the stars to line up like Orion’s belt, holding everything together, but, just as in my life, most things seem scattered and there remains a disconnect, as vast as this night winter sky.

A frozen tear stops dead on my face as I begin to realize the insanity of laying on the
He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.

front lawn in the dead of winter. I start to shiver and grow incredibly cold, but yet, I know that God is calling me to something more in the middle of all of this chaos and defeat. And just at my coldest moment, the ends of the night curtain swoop down, as the sky tent folds in and wraps around me like a blanket, holding me tightly, warming my soul.

The voice of the prophet whispers into my ear: Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? The one who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name; because this one is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing.

And just as suddenly as it swooped down around me, the sky expands again, but this time, it is not a vast sea of nameless flickers, it is a beautiful painting of life “whose understanding is unsearchable.”

I am finally able to stand, to wipe away the tears of frustration and once again the voice whispers to me:

God does not faint or grow weary; God’s understanding is unsearchable. God gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

I am filled as I breathe deeply and taste again for the first time the beauty of creation. My energy is renewed. My focus is clear. Every weary and faint joint in my body is renewed by strength of my God. I do not need to do it all. As I walk into the house, I know that in times of exhaustion, I can stop and wait for the Lord to reveal the beauty in the strength of being a simple and beloved child of God. I’ll buy lunch tomorrow, because surely my lunch bag will be frozen by morning.

Stephaine Templin Ashford is a UCC minister serving under the formula agreement as the pastor of Rock Presbyterian Church, Fair Hill, Maryland

Questions for Reflection

1. When you feel overwhelmed by everyday duties, how do you seek God’s presence?
2. God calls you by name. What are some places in your life where you feel nameless and invisible?
3. God has a wisdom far beyond our understanding. What are some ways that you could try to fill your thoughts with God’s wisdom instead of the ways of the world?
4. What are some times that you felt that God raised you up on wings like eagles? Celebrate those times.

Prayer: Loving and comforting God, I know that you are with me in times of stress and fatigue. Pull me out of these times and remind me that you are as vast as the sky and as near as my own skin. You are able to lift me out of exhaustion into a new path of flight. Help me to trust in your abilities and not to rely on my own strength alone. Amen.
“To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.”

WHEN ONE OF my best friends told me she was being physically abused by her boyfriend I was appalled. I was so angry that anyone would hurt someone I loved so much. I immediately went into a tirade about why she had to leave him immediately. I know now that this was not the best way that I could have reacted.

I believe that these words of Paul to the Corinthians are an appeal to look at each other from perspectives different than our own, to try to empathize with each other. While there is no way that I can say that I know what it is like to be in an abusive relationship, I can search my personal experiences to find a time when I felt totally and completely betrayed by a loved one. In that moment of misery, confusion, and brokenness, the last thing I wanted was someone to tell me what I needed to do, to tell me that they knew what was right for me. What I really wanted was someone to listen to me, someone to love me. I needed someone to assure me that God loved me no matter what, to be the messenger of the good news that God would be beside me during my time of pain and sustain me as I overcame it.

When we empathize, or try to identify with the situations and feelings of others, we can see past our behaviors to the effects our behaviors have. Physical abuse is an issue of power and control. When I reacted by telling my friend that I knew what was best for her, I became just another person close to her that was attempting to control her.

At that moment the most helpful and most important thing I could have done was to listen, to do what the Quakers call, “hearing a person into speech.” The value of this simple act of listening is profound. It creates a safe place, affirms her dignity as a child of God, and respects her life, her story. This is an act of love. By deeply listening to her, hearing her into speech, I could have created a space that is safe for her to decide what next steps she will make in her life. In this safe space she can begin the journey of regaining control of her own life.

Anything we can do to try to genuinely understand the situations of those around us is really a sign of love. Sometimes, especially with our closest friends, we can presume that we know all there is to know about a person. But we need to remember to always try to see others fresh and new in each moment, as children of God brought to us for a reason. We need to convey, even in nonverbal ways, that we care for those around us and are always interested in understanding them.

In the situation of my friend, I knew that there were also things that I could do to educate myself about the issue in order to reach a higher level of understanding. I read several helpful books which reinforced what Paul seems to be telling us, that we need to do what we can to look at things through the eyes of another rather than thinking that we know what is best for others. The first step in shifting our perspectives is genuine listening, without judgment.

I believe that in addition to listening and attempting to understand, the empathy Paul speaks of also includes an action component, a goal of empowerment. By broadening his hori-
The first step in shifting our perspectives is genuine listening, without judgment.

...ions to understand people in positions he is not in, Paul is able to reach those very different than him, to bring them closer to God and salvation. I knew that trying very hard to understand my friend’s situation did not seem like doing enough. I have since realized the wonderful fulfillment of raising my voice, of standing with those who have been through similar terrible situations, to raise awareness of the issue, and try to show everyone that it is only by raising all of our voices united that change can occur. This is the type of change we are called as Christians to work toward when we are told in Isaiah 1:17 to seek justice.

Kate Davidheiser, a member at St. Paul’s UCC, Pottstown, Pennsylvania is currently a seminary student at Lancaster Theological Seminary.

Questions for Reflection

1. Remember a time when you have been hurt by a loved one. How was God revealed to you through a loving presence? Who was your messenger of good news, and what qualities of that person would you like to emulate?

2. Think of a time when someone has gone out of their way to get to know you better. What physical indicators (body language, tone of voice, times of silence, etc.) did they use that let you know that they were giving you their full, care-filled attention?

3. Sometimes there is a fine line between giving advice and pushing your opinions on others. Have you ever made another feel like you knew what was best for her without trying first to entirely understand her situation? How might you have reacted differently?

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for giving us the ability to listen deeply to the problems of our friends and loved ones. Give us strength so that we may be a rock for people to rest their burdens on. Help us to know when to keep our mouths silent so we may hear all. Give us the resources and knowledge to use our voices for the wellbeing of all people in times of great misfortune. Give us the strength of understanding so that we may become all things to all people. Through your guidance we can become the light in the darkness, hope when there is a feeling of hopelessness, a messenger of your good news. Through you we can elevate those in times of weakness, so that united we can stand up and in a single voice fight for change.
COMPANY DINNER
As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her and she began to serve them. Mark 1:29–31

Some commentators identify this scripture as significant for women. We meet the first woman in Mark. She receives the first healing. Jesus intervenes within the household bringing status to the powerless and importance to domesticity. Other commentaries identify it as one of the series of actions as Jesus initiates his ministry and it is passed over without much attention. In spite of these interpretations, what I can’t help but think about when I read this scripture is what it is like to have unexpected guests show up at the door at the dinner hour. For Simon Peter’s mother-in-law this problem is compounded. Not only is she sick, the story takes place on the Sabbath, a day when meal preparation was to be done ahead of time.

Rules of hospitality demand graciousness. I was taught that when unexpected guests arrive at your door at dinnertime you invite them to eat. Happy or not to see them you offer a warm welcome and to your table a loaf of bread, on hand leftovers, and that unopened assortment of pickled condiments your received the prior Christmas. I am usually good at following these rules but this scripture reminds me of an occasion when I was so inhospitable my ancestral southern mothers who have been ashamed of me.

On a balmy summer evening about five years ago my daughter and her friend brought eleven street-people home to dinner. Now everyone has a friend or relative who is expert at arriving while the pork roast is still hot. That’s predictable and manageable. But in my domestic world it is not often that I witness the disembarkment from two tiny cars, eleven big, dirty people who are then ushered into the foyer and stand waiting like restaurant patrons not quite sure whether self seating or being seated is the rule. My ability to speak left me. My mind however was reeling. I didn’t want them sitting anywhere. I kept thinking of the money I had recently spent on carpet and upholstery cleaning.

After standing speechless for what seemed a very long time, my thoughts turned to supplies. I knew we did not have enough food in the house for 14 people. We didn’t even have enough for three people and this extra eleven looked hungry. I must tell you that I was only about three weeks into a recovery from a hysterectomy and my daughter was in charge of the shopping. In fact, when she had left that afternoon, I thought she was headed to the supermarket.

Finally, some words came out of my mouth. “Where’s the food?” I think it was a reasonable question.

“How could I buy groceries?” she said, “They wouldn’t fit in the car!”

If the term “street people” conjures up images of Bowery drunks and crazy bag ladies I want to offer you a different picture. These were young people, teenagers and mostly underage. They were not runaways but rather cast offs who at best moved from place to place looking for temporary help and at worst actually lived off the streets. They had been abandoned by all except the community that they had created amongst themselves in order to survive.

Unbeknownst to me, for several months my daughter and her friend had been trying to help these kids and for whatever reason on this particular night she decided to bring them home. But at the time I was unaware of their needs and my own limitations made my field of vision incredibly narrow. My daughter, I know, wanted more from me. She had listened to my preaching and was expecting a magnanimous gesture of hospitality. She also wanted my energy and effort in helping these kids. But I was hurting and weary and blind to the hurt and weariness before me. I did not want their needs to hook my awareness.

I just wanted them to leave.
I think Simon Peter’s mother-in-law had the same feelings I was having. I am guessing she was not happy to see Jesus. Going by Mark’s account we can assume she knew at least two things about him. First, she knew he had jeopardized the livelihood of her household, showing up at Simon Peter’s workplace, persuading her hot-headed son-in-law to trade in his fishing nets for what must have seemed like a pipe dream. Secondly, she knew he was causing conflict in the local synagogue. That embarrassment would have been reported to a women whose daughter was married to the chief cohort of the troublemaker. I can imagine the local gossip rushing over to tell her the titillating news before the men arrived. If she hadn’t already been sick, it was probably enough to have sent her to her bed.

The scripture goes on to tell us that Jesus healed her and she got up and began serving. It makes it sound as if she got healed so she could wait on this bunch of men. That doesn’t sound like good news to me. If Jesus had been one of the crowd at my house and he had offered to do a miracle for me, healing me, so I could get up and work, would not have made my short list of choices. If Jesus was going to do a miracle, why didn’t he produce the dinner? Bread, wine, and fried fish were certainly within his culinary expertise and we know he was spectacular at making a little go a long way.

But that is not what Jesus did. He healed her. I believe a closer look at the scriptures tells a story of empowerment. Though I am sure she took care of her guests, I don’t think this was about the dinner at all. It is interesting that the word translated “to serve” or “to minister” (Greek: diakoneo) is used only three other times by Mark. In Mark 1:13, the angels minister to Jesus after his ordeal in the wilderness, in Mark 10:45, it describes the servant hood of Jesus, and in Mark 15:41, it describes the discipleship of the women who followed Jesus.

These powerful meanings reflect on the transformation of Simon Peter’s mother-in-law. I think Jesus gave her a way to see beyond herself, beyond that crowded house, beyond a world that devalued women.

Healing cannot be confused with curing. Certainly curing can be a part of healing, but in a society where the social and economic ramifications of illness devastate lives healing effects multiple systems beyond the physical. Healing moves us beyond our current circumstances into a different way of living no longer bound by external forces that dictate our reality. Healing empowers us to be able to move toward a vision not yet realized.

To be ministered to and to be healed and then to be empowered to become the minister, the healer, the comforter, the servant-leader...that’s transformation. To be connected into a community of disciples making a public stand to follow Jesus in resisting dangerous power structures and oppressive cultural norms...that’s transformation. That’s real power.

In case you were wondering, those kids did get feed. As it happens someone had dropped off for the food pantry a whole case of those little packages of Asian noodles, the kind that when you throw them in boiling water swell to proportions that would impress even the loaves and fishes crowd. And yes, I did eventually get over my self-centered rudeness. I a way I suppose I got healed too. My healing process began when I started treating the least of these children in my community with some kindness and respect. It was only then that I was able to recognize the face of Jesus under the dirt.

Three of them stayed until Christmas — but that’s another story.

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**Questions for Reflection**

1. Think about your own experiences of entertaining unexpected guests.
2. Reflect on a time in your own life when your physical or emotional needs/ hurts or pains blinded you from seeing the needs of others around you.
3. Think about an area in your emotional life that has been healed by God and equipped you to offer hope and healing to another.

Prayer: Loving God, Compassionate Healer, Open my eyes to see a vision of healing: help me to recognize the need for healing in my life and others around me give me the grace to understand that your healing offers new ways into the future. Open my mouth to speak with a voice of hope: help me to tell my own story of healing with confidence, joy and discernment give me the grace to speak words of comfort and healing to others. May the vision of my soul be Your vision, May the voice of my heart be Your voice. Amen.
“Let us go on...” —Mark 1:38

VARSITY, the Golden Retriever puppy my son and I raised for The Seeing Eye, recently returned to Morristown, New Jersey for his final training to become a Seeing Eye dog. As you are reading this, if all has gone as expected, someone at The Seeing Eye is being challenged to literally put his or her life in Varsity’s hands (er—paws).

It is a very scary proposition for most visually impaired persons. I’ve talk with folks and read many accounts written by Seeing Eye dog owners, and almost without exception, they can vividly recall their fears and doubts prior to taking hold of that harness and stepping out to follow a dog — assuredly a well-trained dog, but still a dog — for the first time: Will I crash into a parking meter? Will I be led safely across a busy street? Will I trip on curbs, fall down steps? What if my dog leads me in a direction I didn’t plan to go?

Listen to this excerpt from an interview with Jane Lang, a New Jersey woman reflecting on her first experience with a Seeing Eye dog: 1

I’ll never forget my first experience at The Seeing Eye... I was so nervous because I’d never been out of state, away from home. I thought I wouldn’t be good enough to do it. I was so scared. I got Sandy on Sunday, and the first Monday they start you out on Maple Avenue. I got out of the van and my instructor said, “Now, pick up the harness, say the dog’s name and give him the command.”

The wind was blowing and I knew the sun was out because I could feel it on my face, and I said, “Sandy, forward!” Well, she took off like a bat out of hell. Dogs move about four miles an hour. I never moved that fast when I had a cane... When I got to the end of the block, I didn’t even realize I was crying, I was so happy. I felt like I was flying.

My instructor asked me, “What’s the matter?” I said, “I think I’ve got a little something in my eye.” But I think he knew. From then on, boy, a dog was for me!

Towards the end of the interview, Jane says:

I call The Seeing Eye my “miracle place.” I believe that Seeing Eye dogs are the Holy Spirit in motion... This dog – all my dogs – made me able to be the person I knew I could be.

The God who calls us by name, whose will is always for healing and wholeness and fullness of life, the God who was at work in Jane Lang’s life, in the lives of the Hebrew people, the apostle Paul, and the first century C.E. believers is also at work in each of our lives, challenging us, too, to be the persons God knows (even if we aren’t convinced) we can be.

Our specific circumstances may be different, but the same opportunity to take hold of new life — like the opportunity Varsity’s new person is being offered — to experience the healing and empowering grace of God — is being offered to each one of us. But will I crash? Will I be safe? Will I trip, fall down? What if God leads me in a direction I didn’t plan to go?
We can let fears and doubts hold us back, or we can risk trusting that the stories we have read and heard that have borne witness to God’s unfailing faithfulness really are true.

Shall we believe the messengers of Good News?

We can let fears and doubts hold us back, or we can risk trusting that the stories we have read and heard that have borne witness to God’s unfailing faithfulness really are true.


**Questions for Reflection**

1. For what in your life are you most thankful to God? Where can you recognize God’s healing grace at work in your life? Who needs to hear your story?

2. Where do you still need healing? How might that healing change your life? Are you ready to change? What fears or doubts do you have about the possibility of new life?

3. Jesus knew it was time to “go on” to neighboring towns even though there were still plenty of opportunities for ministry right where he was. How can you be sure where God is calling you to go? Are there ways God may be calling you to “go on” in your life that don’t require a physical move?

Prayer: God of healing, God of hope, help me to trust Your leading in my life. Give me the wisdom and courage to become the person you know I can be. Strengthen my witness as a messenger, in word and in deed, of your awesome will for wholeness and healing. Amen.

The Rev. Bonnie L. Moore is the Associate Pastor at Wentz’s United Church of Christ in Worcester, Pennsylvania.

We can let fears and doubts hold us back, or we can risk trusting that the stories we have read and heard that have borne witness to God’s unfailing faithfulness really are true.

Shall we believe the messengers of Good News?
I’VE BEEN THINKING about “messengers of the good news” in the context of justice for women and wondered if I should lift up a woman for each day of Women’s Week who was or is a model messenger. There are so many to choose from — women who have gone against all the odds to make the lives of women and children better, to make society and communities more equitable, habitable and just, to make this planet a safer and less toxic place to live. There are women who have disrupted history and rewritten the human story through courageous acts which confronted the evils of racism and sexism and turned the status quo on its head. There are women who have written books which have changed lives and minds, and women who have sung songs which have become the touch point of movements for social justice.

That would have been one way to go, but I decided not to do that. I hope, however, that you will spend some time this week in groups or by yourself naming some of these messengers, and giving thanks for the Spirit which inspired and sustained them. So often such women are lost in the history books our children study in school like the nameless women of the Bible without whom God's good news would also have been lost.

Instead, I want to share some thoughts about us as messengers of the good news. You. Me. Your daughters and granddaughters. Your nieces and aunts and cousins. Your next door neighbor and your best friend. Us — we are the messengers of the good news and God has called us to this ministry of bearing witness. God did not only pour out God’s spirit upon Jesus to preach good news to the poor and declare the acceptable year of the Lord (Luke 4:18-19); we have also been anointed, by the waters of our baptisms and the power of our communities of faith, to be the messengers of the good news.

What is this good news? Certainly it is good news to know, really know in the core of our souls, that God loves us. Certainly it is good news to know, really know in the heart of our hearts, that we are forgiven. Knowing, really knowing, these two things can free us to be who we are in the fullness of grace.

But the good news is also more than an individual blessing of hope and healing. If it is good news, it is also intended to be heard by those who have been most marginalized. In Jesus’ time, it was the widows, the orphans, the lepers, the poor who were among the most marginalized in society and by the religious institutions of his time. To be a messenger of the good news to “the least of these” is to bear witness to your own belief that God’s love extends beyond, around, through or despite all the divisions and barriers we set up between us as sisters and brothers. To bear witness to the good news is to expose the false assumptions upon which these barriers exist.

Sometimes messengers are not welcomed. Those who have a great deal invested in keeping the barriers up don’t like messengers of the good news. But if we are to be faithful, faithful to the gospel of God’s extravagant welcome, faithful to God’s desire for all of God’s people to dwell together in harmony and peace, we, too, must be the messengers.

What does it look like to be a messenger of the good news? It doesn’t have to be a mighty act worthy of attention on the evening news. It could
be as simple — and courageous — as letting someone know that the racist or sexist joke they just told is offensive to you and that you hope they do not repeat it ever again. It could be as genuine as supporting the Gay-Straight Alliance in your children’s high school as a parent who believes that all of God’s children are equally loved and worthy. It could be as mindful as sending a letter to the editor of your local newspaper expressing your opinion on an issue current in your community or in this world in such a way as to cultivate respectful public dialogue.

You may also chose to commit an act of civil disobedience, like the many UCC members and other people of faith who cross the line at the annual School of the Americas demonstration, believing so strongly that our government should not be training military leaders of other countries to engage in the torture and harassment of their own citizens that you are willing to pay a price for your right to express yourself.

No matter what you do as a messenger of the good news, I encourage you only to do this — make it tangible. Make it real. Make it visible in some way. God’s love means little if we cannot see it, taste it, hear it, touch it. As the song by Sweet Honey in the Rock says, “We are the ones we are waiting for.” Don’t wait any longer. Bear witness to the good news which has given you new life — for God’s sake. Don’t wait any longer.

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Join us in celebrating the
Family Peace Sabbath

The purpose of the Family Peace Sabbath is to:
Promote just relationships
and
Prevent family violence
by
Raising a united voice within the faith community

We ask the faith community to join together by holding a worship service that honors just relationships on February 10th to 12th, 2006.

For more information, including a toolkit with worship service and planning suggestions, contact us at:

www.family-peace.org
Partners for Family Peace
P.O. Box 507, Gilbertsville, PA 19525
 familiaypeace1@aol.com

We believe it is possible to create a community where children are cared for, dating is safe, and families are peaceful.
Why Dignity is essential to just relationships

An understanding of Human Dignity is the foundation of a just relationship. Focusing on these characteristics will help ensure that your relationships are healthy and life-affirming:

**Intrinsic Worth**

Every person has value and worth. This is intrinsic to that person. It is not the result of accomplishments or based on the value a person might have to someone else. Dignity is not a privilege, it is a basic human right.

**Some-body-ness**

Oppression is a structural denial of dignity. People who are oppressed often internalize this denial of dignity. Being able to claim “I Am Somebody,” without needing to deny the dignity of another in the process, nurtures the sense of self-worth that leads to wholeness as a human.

**Equal Regard**

We uphold the dignity of one another, regarding each person as having equal value and worth. When we hold another with equal regard we affirm the basic humanness of that person. When we fail to do so we deny the dignity and essential humanity of that person.

**Self-Awareness**

We do our part to keep a relationship healthy by maintaining an awareness of the physical and emotional presence we are contributing, and what values and dreams are driving us.

**Responsibility**

We take responsibility for our actions and our inactions, without fear or hiding. We manage ourselves with commitment and self-respect. We approach others knowing that we have the ability and responsibility to work to bring out the best of each relationship.

**Wholeness**

We can best enter into a relationship as a complete person rather than seeking a sense of completion and validation with each encounter. Being a ‘complete self’ includes having a defined set of values and dreams, a sense of self-worth and independence, an ability to honor boundaries, and a wide-stretching structure of supportive relationships.

We believe it is possible to create a community where children are cared for, dating is safe, and families are peaceful.

Join us in promoting Just Relationships and preventing family violence. For more information, contact us at:

www.family-peace.org

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I BELIEVE that men have a responsibility to end violence against women. I believe that it is important for men to take a stand that violence against women is unacceptable and to invite other men to take this stand as well. And I believe that engaging in work to end violence against women will help men find wholeness in their lives.

The simple but profound question for me is “why do I as a man work to end violence against women?” Hopefully, my thoughts to that question will provoke a faithful response by other men to also consider the question. Especially men who are not yet working to end violence against women, that they might be encouraged to join this expression of faithful discipleship.

I was first introduced to the reality of violence against women while I was in college. I attended a program at which there was a “speak-out” of five or six women who shared their stories of surviving violence at the hands of men. These stories of sexual assault, beatings, emotional and physical abuse made a deep and lasting impact on my life.

Before this I had never encountered the problem of violence against women while I was in college. I attended a program at which there was a “speak-out” of five or six women who shared their stories of surviving violence at the hands of men. These stories of sexual assault, beatings, emotional and physical abuse made a deep and lasting impact on my life.

Yet, although I now knew that a problem existed, I didn’t really want to do anything about it. I can remember praying to God that this issue might be taken away from me. I wanted to go back to not knowing about the reality of violence against women. After all, I was not personally involved. I was not an abuser nor had I ever suffered sexual violence. As far as I knew no one in my family had either. So why should I as a man be concerned about violence against women?

The answer I got in prayer was clear and unequivocal. I was being called to work toward ending violence against women, and this work was important to my faith development as a disciple of Jesus Christ. There was to be no escaping the issue.

Men face a different set of challenges in doing this work than women. As a man who is committed to ending violence I am aware of the challenges that this work presents to men. I share my experience of these challenges and how I have dealt with them in the hope that this might help bring more men into the struggle to end violence against women.

Although there are many challenges to face, they can be overcome. In the past twenty-five years it has become socially unacceptable to drink and drive. Not just illegal, but also not acceptable. We must work to make violence against women socially unacceptable. Men have a critical role to play in this shift of social norms and expectations.

We save the challenge of moving beyond what might be called the “ignorance is bliss” trap. If it is not affecting my life it isn’t happening, or doesn’t matter. We must listen to and hear the truth of women’s lives, the reality that abuse is happening and that it does matter. And we need to act rather than hide in denial.

The statistics around this are awful. But statistics do not motivate me to action. The lives of women I care for move me out of my denial to take responsibility for this violence.

• One in four women and girls is a victim of a sexual assault, usually before she is 18. I have four nieces, ages six to twelve. I work to make sure they do not suffer this
violence as well as your nieces, your daughters, your granddaughters.

• One in three women experiences physical abuse in an intimate relationship at some point in her lifetime. I have a mother and two sisters. I work to help make sure all mothers, all sisters, all daughters are free from abuse and violence in their families.

I invite other men to take on the responsibility of ending violence against women. This brings us to the second challenge. Taking responsibility for men’s violence and the privilege behind this violence. This is very difficult.

Engaging in the work to end violence has led me to see the patterns of privilege that I as a man receive just for being a man. These patterns of privilege seem so normal it is hard for many men to see them. And when they are pointed out it is easy to become defensive or to deny there is anything there at all. Patterns of privilege are like the air. It seems like nothing is there, yet, we are surrounded by it, and we breathe it whether we like it or not.

Privilege is a relative thing. We can experience a lack of power and privilege in one aspect of our lives and still have privilege in another. Regardless of a man’s race, or economic status, or sexual orientation, relative to women we have privilege as men. Any honest account of how we as men are treated versus how women are treated will uncover this privilege.

Resisting these patterns of privilege can be tricky. Even after I developed an intellectual understanding of how these patterns of privilege operate in society seeing how they operate in my own life has been an ongoing struggle. Despite my commitment to anti-sexist understanding and practice I still slip into sexist ways of doing things.

Addressing issues of privilege is critical to ending violence against women because this violence is supported by a belief that men are entitled to get their way in relation to women. This sense of entitlement can be the visible manifestation of privilege. Taking responsibil-

ity for men’s violence requires looking at this belief in male entitlement and the specific behaviors that flow from this belief.

Working to end violence against women does not require perfection or political correctness. It does require a commitment to respond with behavior and actions that resist male privilege as inevitable or natural. I seek to become aware of the subtle and not so subtle ways women do not receive the same consideration I am given as a man, and to resist these patterns in my life as best I can.

This involves coming out as an ally for women. In my experience I have found that taking an active and public stand to end violence against women threatens some men very deeply and they can and do react in strongly hostile ways.

There are powerful cultural forces at work that conspire to keep men silent on this issue for fear of becoming the target of violence themselves. Men’s violence is directed not only at women, but also at other men, and at ourselves. I have been the target of scorn that is directly related to my commitment to end violence against women. This criticism has as its goal shaming, isolating, and silencing the man who is challenging male privilege. It can involve verbal attacks or physical threats. This work is so threatening to some men that the only way they can make sense of a man who is working against men’s violence is to question his manhood. One tried and true tactic is the use of homophobic name calling.

From the time we are boys we learn to protect ourselves from challenges to our manhood, to any potential charge that we are somehow less than a man. Although there is a dominant masculinity that men in our culture are socialized to accept, there are in fact many masculinities, many ways to be a man. I have learned that the real task is not so much to “be a man,” as it is to be an adult, to be a whole person.

I find that rather than being a sign of weakness, working to end violence against women requires inner strength and persistence in the face of opposition and

Patterns of privilege are like the air. It seems like nothing is there, yet, we are surrounded by it, and we breathe it whether we like it or not.
hostility. In these moments especially I remind myself that I am a disciple of Jesus Christ and that the type of man I am trying to be is a man like Jesus.

Jesus modeled how to be a man and live a life of integrity and faithfulness.

• A man who ate with those considered unclean and outcast and who embraced and healed people he was not supposed to touch.
• A man who while standing next to a woman about to be stoned to death by a mob of men challenged these men to be honest about their own lives.
• A man who resisted dominant masculinities as he embodied justice and practiced nonviolence in this relationships with others.

This leads to the quest to live a life of integrity, a life that faithful and whole. God’s grace blesses us with the ability to move from violence to wholeness, from alienation to connection, healing the wounds we carry within us that cause us to fear and seek to control.

One key way that we do this is through just relationships. Relationships that honor the reality that each person is a child of God. Seeing yourself and your partner as a child of God is the foundation on which a just relationship is built. Just relationships are based on the principles of dignity, respect, empathy, acceptance, and mutuality. Just relationships exclude any possibility of physical, emotional, sexual, or economic abuse.

Partners for Family Peace, the organization I work with, seeks to promote just relationships. We call this the DREAM framework. If you can DREAM (dignity, respect, empathy, acceptance, and mutuality) it, you can do it.

The DREAM framework seeks to provide a process for healing and spiritual transformation that empowers a person to live a life of integrity and honesty, especially in their closest interpersonal relationships. These close interpersonal relationships include intimate, committed partnerships as well as friendships and family ties with parents, siblings, and children. The ability to engage in just relationships with our partners is hard work. It is however work that is possible to learn and to do.

**Dignity.** I am able to acknowledge that I am somebody — a child of God with intrinsic value and worth. I am able to acknowledge that my partner is also a child of God with intrinsic value and worth and I am able to treat this person with equal regard.

**Respect.** I am able to share my true self, — my feelings, thoughts, and needs with my partner without wanting to manipulate this person. I am able to listen to and hear my partner share their true self without fear of being manipulated.

**Empathy.** I am able to show interest in, respond to, and understand the world-view of my partner while maintaining a separate sense of self. I am able to express caring and compassion as I seek connection with my partner.

**Acceptance.** I am able to accept my partner for who they are. I am able to nurture both myself and my partner as we grow in life and in faith aware that this growth involves both a coming together and a diverging.

**Mutuality.** I am able to engage in true dialogue with my partner caring for each other and the relationship as a whole. I am able to be honest, open and direct in communicating with my partner. I am able to cooperate and share power with my partner, rejoicing in the one anotherness and reciprocity of our communion with each other.

Why do I as a man work to end violence against women? I work to end violence against women because this work saves lives. It saves the lives of girls and women who might otherwise be abused. I work to end violence against women because this work transforms the lives of men like myself who otherwise would be alienated from God, others, and ourselves. It empowers me to be able to live into just relationships. This work is a work of faith, an act of grace.

*Rev. John Steitz serves as Minister and Executive Director of Partners for Family Peace.*
Since last year, The Pilgrim Press has released many wonderful new resources for women of all races, religions, and ages. We are pleased to share these books with you and hope you will find something of interest for yourself.

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_African American Women Tapping Power and Spiritual Wellness_
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Bible

_On Their Way to Wonderful: A Journey with Ruth and Naomi_
by Linda H. Hollies
144 pp/$18
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Travel through the church year with Ruth and Naomi as your guides. Explores a variety of issues that women will relate to. Includes study questions and journal space.

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_Doing Girlfriend Theology: God-Talk with Young Women_
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Foreword by Rosemary Radford Ruether
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Week 2005
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Women in international mission

An Interview with
Regina Osei, Global Ministries, serving in Ghana

by Ana Gobledale

For we know that all things work together for good to those who love the Lord and are called according to God’s purpose.

—Romans 8:28

Why do some people seem to glow with faith? As I interviewed Regina Osei, Global Ministries missionary serving in Ghana, I sensed a profound joy in her life, a joy in her call to Christian service, a joy grounded in a strong faith. Her firm sense that God is using her for good resonates through her joyful enthusiasm for the work at hand. Her firm belief that she has been “called according to God’s purpose” is the guideline throughout her joy-filled journey from Memphis to Ghana. Regina’s favourite hymn, “Great Is Your Faithfulness,” celebrates this attitude of joy and faithfulness, so I have scattered verses throughout this article.

As you read Regina’s reflections, consider this element of joy in her life and in your own. And remember to smile!

Ana Gobledale served our church in South Africa and Zimbabwe, from 1984–2000. Currently, she serves Global Ministries with her husband, Tod, as chaplain of Churches of Christ Theological College in Melbourne, Australia.

Great is your faithfulness, Oh God, Creator. With you no shadow of turning we see.

Regina’s mother was a powerful spiritual influence...

I was born into a Christian home in Memphis, Tennessee, and was reared in a female-dominated environment, by my mother, grandmother, aunt and cousin. While not the traditional two-parent family home, it was not a single-parent home either, but rather an African traditional extended-family setting.

My mother has been the greatest spiritual influence in my life. A devoted member of the Missionary Baptist Church, she brought me up to attend Sunday school and Baptist Training Union. She encouraged me to learn piano, and I played for Sunday school. Later I became a faithful member of the church choir. My mom was a seeker of the deeper things of God and was open to learning from people who attended other churches and believed different doctrines. Some of her friends invited us to a local Pentecostal church tent meeting where I first became acquainted with the supernatural power and work of the Holy Spirit. There I made a deeper commitment to God and received the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Great is your faithfulness, Great is your faithfulness. Morning by morning new mercies I see.

A visit to Ghana leads Regina to hear a call to give...

In the summer of 1996, when I first traveled to Ghana and the Ivory Coast, I had an epiphany—a God moment—with an overwhelming feeling that God want-
ed me to do something for the children and the poor in Ghana. I served as a senior community relations specialist at FedEx Corporation and was responsible for FedEx volunteer and community outreach programs, so I initiated a collection of school supplies and books with 13 local businesses and churches in Memphis, and we shipped nine pallets of goods. I then started a ministry in my church, Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church, called the ARMS ministry (Ambassadors Responding to Missions through Service). In collaboration with a Campus Crusade for Christ ministry that focuses on “sending people of color to serve a world of color,” we facilitated youth mission trips for evangelistic outreach in South Africa and Ghana.

All I have needed your hand has provided,
Great is your faithfulness, God unto me.

Regina connects with Global Ministries...
Upon my return from Ghana, I contacted Global Ministries to learn what mission is all about and what opportunities existed. No positions were available in my “heart throb” country, Ghana, nor were any positions available elsewhere for which I qualified. I still had three years of seminary to go, so I was encouraged to get back in touch if I was still interested after graduation. Immediately after I graduated and was ordained, I received an urgent mission request bulletin from someone I barely knew who sent it to me with a note attached that said, “thought you might be interested in

this.” A position in Ghana that I actually qualified for was posted. Feeling that it was more than mere coincidence and that God was trying to tell me something, I applied! The rest, as they say, is history.

Pardon for sin and a peace so enduring,
Your own dear presence to cheer and to guide.

Serving in Ghana—the rewards and challenges Regina has met along the way...
I serve the Christian Council of Ghana as Communications and Programme Associate and am responsible for the Council’s publications (newsletters, brochures, etc.) and facilitate workshops on evangelism, corruption, communication and Bible study.... virtually whatever I have been asked to do. I also work with people living with HIV/AIDS and serve as an associate pastor at the Baptist International Church.

I am most rewarded by being able to contribute positively on committees bringing about changes that affect the lives of people for good.
I am most rewarded by being able to contribute positively on committees bringing about changes that affect the lives of people for good. I also enjoy helping to build the capacities of people by teaching them new skills or sharing new information. This is a giving and receiving experience, as I have learned and grown twice as much as I’ve helped others.

The most challenging aspects of my work arise because the organizations I serve struggle financially. “We don’t have money-oh!” has become a common mantra of Ghanaians, and too often it is true. Things that American office workers take for granted—like toilet paper, soap and typing paper—can be difficult to come by. Because of the low cash flow, things have had to be put on hold.

You do not change, your compassions they fail not; all of your goodness forever will be.

Regina finds strength in shared spiritual disciplines...

My husband and I together read the daily selections in the Bible in a Year which we then reflect on and discuss. Daily times of prayer together and regular times of fasting (primarily as a church body) have been very rewarding.

Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,
Great is your faithfulness, God, unto me!

Meeting Jesus face-to-face...

I met a woman visiting the Christian Council of Ghana’s Relief Unit. A refugee, she had been forced to leave her home in Sierra Leone three years earlier. She explained how she and her husband, a diplomat, and children had lived comfortably and happily before the war, how she watched soldiers murder her husband and children by cutting their bodies into pieces and burn her home down... how she and her remaining children fled Sierra Leone with only the clothing on their back... how they walked for hundreds of miles through rough terrain, sometimes not knowing from where their next meal would come... how after they reached Ghana, she became terribly ill, grew lean, became unable to walk or talk... how God in God’s sovereign mercy raised her up. When we met, she was relatively well, gaining weight and working. Humbly, her words always acknowledged her love, affection and adoration for the loving God who had preserved her life and brought her through such trying circumstances. This was the day that I met Jesus face-to-face... in the face of this woman, God’s servant, even “the least of God’s little ones.”

And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. — 2 Corinthians 9:8

Questions for Reflection

- Regina speaks of receiving the baptism of the Holy Spirit. What does this phrase mean to you? How do you identify with Regina’s experience?
- Regina describes her call by Global Ministries to serve in Ghana as “more than mere coincidence.” When have things occurred in your life in such a way that you have felt the hand of God at work?
- Regina speaks of regular fasting as a church community. When do you fast, as an individual or as a community? What role does fasting play in your faith and witness?

Prayer Opportunities

- Pray for Regina and Prince and their ministries in Ghana.
- Pray for the Christian Council of Ghana, especially the work of its Relief Unit with refugees.
- Pray for families of all descriptions, that they might be filled with love and respect for all members.
- All the missionaries serving around the world and supported by the United Church of Christ through Global Ministries.

What can you do to make sure your relationships are Respectful?

Respect is a fundamental part of a just relationship. Focusing on these qualities will ensure that your relationships are respectful:

**Equality**
To embody respect in all of our relationships, we must realize that we are all created equal. When we are respectful we do not attempt to manipulate or control each other. We allow others to make their own decisions and support each other's freedom to do so.

**Self-respect**
True love never involves letting someone take advantage of or walk all over you. To truly respect others we must first know how to truly respect ourselves.

**Communication**
When we are respectful we make sure we communicate our feelings and dreams, and encourage others to do the same, rather than making assumptions about each other.

**Honesty**
One of the greatest signs of respect is to be honest at all times, even when the truth is more painful and tough to deal with.

**Attention**
During interactions, convey that you are fully present in the current moment, clearing your head of all distractions and focusing your full attention on the other person.

**Curiosity**
Expressing a genuine interest in what the other person is thinking and feeling honors the intrinsic worth of that individual.

**Empathy**
When we truly respect others we try to understand the origin of their feelings and motivations. When we understand and identify with the situations of others, we can see past our behavior to notice the effects our behavior is having.
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