

The View from Micah House



Jim Wallis, Executive Director of the Sojourner Community in New York, tells a story about his seminary days. Apparently, the seminarians had been given a fairly open-ended assignment on the Scriptures. One seminarian appeared to do little research although he could be seen regularly with scissors in his hand. On the morning when the class was to present the research, Wallis’ companion came to the front holding a very ornately decorated Bible. “I have cut out all the references to the poor, the orphan, the widow and the stranger,” he said. Then he opened the Bible and showed his companions the few pages and scraps that had survived his editing scissors.

It is a story that comes back to me often, both in the face of those who are Christian and have not allowed those passages to touch their minds and hearts and those Christians who are on fire with love and energy to take the message to heart.

This month I have had the privilege of encountering many who have been touched by the Scriptures. There’s George, a man in his late 30’s who had achieved immense success on Bay Street only to discover that the policies of his company discounted people in an effort to make money. Drinking heavily did not ease his conscience. He began to read the Hindu Scriptures. Tears ran down his face as he shared his ‘God experience,’ an experience that moved him deeply. He resigned, came back to Winnipeg, his home town, and bought a home in the North End. He is looking for ways to make a difference.

Then there was the group of parishioners who in their own way had encountered a loving God through the Ignatian Spiritual exercises. Many felt compelled to share the God they had come to know more intimately with loving action on behalf of suffering people. They committed themselves to two hours of service a week.

Georgia, a woman who has no degrees, apologized for her lack of education as she witnessed to her trust in a loving God while reflecting on the Sunday Gospel. Her relationship with God helped her be a source of love and compassion for her extended family. Finally, a parish outside Winnipeg began plans for a parish outreach when someone expressed sorrow at the lack of it in their parish.

There is a hymn that implores the Spirit to ‘blow where (you) will’. The Spirit DOES blow where the Spirit wants to. God’s Spirit is not limited to specific times or people. Often It manifests Itself in a niggling ‘dis’ease in the human soul urging a person to reflect on a status quo in need of change. As those who are disturbed share their insights with the community, building the Kingdom of God begins to be realized. Joel has God say in the Book of Joel, “I will pour out my spirit upon you. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, and your young men see visions.” May each of us be attentive to the urging of the Spirit. May the unease we experience when we read passages which detail what God wants of us in our treatment of the poor, the orphan, the widow and the stranger lead us to compassionate action.

Contributed by Sr. Johanna Jonker, Social Justice Coordinator. Micah House is at 1039 Main St., Winnipeg.



Compassion gained by ‘walking in your neighbour’s shoes’

It’s pretty difficult to perform well when voices in your head are telling you that you are worthless and the people around you do not seem to disagree with that opinion.

This was the experience of twenty participants in a “Hearing Voices that are Distressing” workshop held on April 5th at the Manitoba Schizophrenia Society. Workshop participants included family members of people who are voice hearers and members of the three diocesan JustFaith groups

The workshop was developed by Dr. Patricia Degan, herself a voice hearer. Realizing that most mental health professionals are unaware of what it is like to hear voices, she developed a curriculum that replicates the experience of hearing distressing voices.

After an introduction by Jane Burpee, Public Education Coordinator for the Society, I listened to a tape that gave me various negative messages, messages that a person with schizophrenia might hear. While listening, I was interviewed by a psychiatrist and had my reading comprehension tested. Workshop facilitators led us from room to room and task to task. The cold clinical way we were treated by the facilitators was also a challenge. They treated us as if...well, as if we were mentally ill.

I thought I was handling the voices quite well. They were saying things such as, “You’re dirty, disgusting and everybody knows it.” I knew it was just a tape and I wasn’t intimidated by the rudeness of the staff; not for the first ten minutes anyway. I knew that it was harder than I thought when I was given a paper and told to write the words of O Canada. I was stunned when I couldn’t. Try as I may, “We

stand on guard for thee,” just wasn’t coming into my head. After forty-two minutes the voices stopped and I was thankfully able to turn off the tape.

It was not an experience I would like to repeat. I was there as part of the JustFaith course, to raise my sensitivity to the poor and marginalized. If compassion means walking in your neighbour’s shoes then I gained a little bit of compassion that night.

After experiencing the voices, we were asked what emotions we had felt. Answers included: scared, distracted, angry, demeaned. One person said he just wanted to get the tasks done, wanted to “finish to fail”.

Schizophrenia strikes one in every 100 persons worldwide, regardless of age, race or social background. That represents 10,000 people in Manitoba alone, with impacts on an additional 30,000 people. The Manitoba Schizophrenia Society’s mission is to promote and improve the quality of life for those living with schizophrenia through recovery focused support services. It can be reached at 786-1616 or 1-800-263-5545.

Before the workshop, I don’t know what I would have said if asked “What words come immediately to your mind when you hear the word schizophrenia?” But now my first three words about people living with schizophrenia would be: brave, brave, brave. The workshop was a unique eye-opening experience. I was left wondering about my own misconceptions and judgements about mental illness. It gave me a deep respect for those who cope with this illness on a daily basis.

Contributed by Cleda Reeves

Heartsong a compassionate experience

Heartsong is a free of charge, responsive respite retreat that is offered annually by St. Benedict’s Retreat Centre with co-sponsorship from St. Boniface Pastoral Care. This year some 30 people living with HIV/AIDS and 5 volunteer staff took part in the retreat from May 15 - 17. The St. Benedict’s Foundation and Cantate, an annual fundraising concert, subsidize the retreat. Coordinating this year’s retreat were Sr. Virginia Evard, Fr. Rolland Lanoie, Chas van Dyck, Jocelyn Preston and Faigie Greaves.

“This is a special, safe place; we are watched over, cared for and loved,” said Ken, who is returning for his second year. “This is an open, honest, family place where we can be ourselves. Only after coming here did I really understand what it meant not to be alone with this.”

The ministry of care at HeartSong comes in many forms: savouring wonderful food, taking part in group sharing sessions, getting one on one counselling, taking an opportunity to make new friends, strolling the spacious grounds to the river bank, or just sharing a cup of coffee or a smoke at the picnic table outside in the sun. Organizer Sr. Virginia Evard notes that, “the virtual environment at St. Ben’s, and the people who come here, are ministry to each other.” A self care component is offered through the generosity of trained volunteers providing hair cuts, acupuncture, therapeutic touch, sacro-cranial therapy, and Reiki. A sweat lodge is part of this year’s program.

Building on a similar retreat offered in Texas, Sr. Mary Coswin and Fr. Vince Herner launched HeartSong for HIV/AIDS patients 14 years ago. Jocelyn Preston, an HIV nurse from St. Boniface Hospital has seen many changes over her years of volunteering at HeartSong. “The face has changed; we used to see men only. Now we see everyone: parents and children, a grandmother with AIDS and her granddaughter caregiver, men and women of every race. There is a level of acceptance that they don’t find anywhere else – a freedom.” Preston categorizes the retreat as a renewing, healing time for sharing, processing, networking and bereavement. Another positive result is the forming of friendships that grow beyond the retreat. Its popularity is growing through word of mouth.

Music Therapist, Chas van Dyck is “blown away by their courage” in the face of devastating health crises and the isolation they experience fuelled by fear and ignorance. He feels honoured to hear the stories of those taking part in the retreat and watches with admiration as they become less defensive in sharing sessions and allow themselves to become vulnerable and participate more fully. He noted that prayer has become more central to the sharing sessions this year.

Kinzie, returning for his third year at HeartSong, remembers his first arrival, “I was really quiet. I didn’t know how



Heartsong Retreat Coordinators, from left: Jocelyn Preston, Fr. Rolland Lanoie, Chas van Dyck and Sr. Virginia Evard

to act or where my place was. Now, we all eat and sleep and sing and dance and play games. We can be ourselves. Love, peace and harmony comes in different nationalities and colours – it’s how you give and receive.”

An evaluation form received at the end of last year’s retreat read: “God lives here.”

Contributed by Barbara Fawcett, St. Ignatius Parish

Director of Sacred Music

The newly established parish of St. Gianna, is currently seeking a Director of Sacred Music.

The applicant’s ability must include:

- The ability to play the key board.
- The ability to lead a variety of choir styles.
- The ability to work with various musicians and instrumentalists.

Experience in liturgical music ministry would be an asset.

The start date for the position would be in September 2006. The position is currently a part-time position with the opportunity for expansion into a full time position as the parish continues to grow.

Applications may be forwarded to:

The Personnel Committee
St. Gianna’s Roman Catholic Parish
1765R Kenaston Blvd.
Winnipeg, Manitoba R3Y 1V8