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Looking for Leaven ...

I am surprised at how many people ask me “are you having fun yet?” Not exactly! But I am learning much more about leaven, that tiny bit that makes all the difference. I am learning that if I can see a little bit of ‘rejoicing’ in whatever is before me, then that releases energy to change everything, me included.

Take for instance Bill, who is sitting next to me at General Council Executive. He turns and says, “We have a polar bear.” I am so stunned at that opening line that I respond, “I didn’t know polar bears were in North Bay.” “They aren’t,” he responds, looking at me oddly. Well, who wouldn’t? Polar bears in North Bay? What was I thinking???

Anyway then he says, “The ----- Zoo didn’t want this 28-year-old polar bear anymore because she was sickly, couldn’t step up the 18 inches into her den, had developed a tremor and was not good for public relations. She was bad for business and they did not want kids to see her.”

In Jesus' day, leaven was yeast or sourdough in a state of fermentation.

When mixed into the dough, leaven causes the bread to rise when baked.

The traditional teaching of the Church is that the Parable of the Leaven, like the preceding Parable of the Mustard Seed, shows how something small becomes something big.

So would North Bay take her? All the folks there said, “No, because what will we do with a sick bear?” But not Bill. He said, “I want our kids to see that we will take in and care for a sick bear.” And somehow what he said touched people’s hearts, and they took the sick bear. Little did the people know that she had never walked on the ground. They built a ramp for her to get into a den. People began putting food in buckets of water and then freezing them for the bear. The bear just looked at that stuff and it took her awhile to figure out she needed to paw her way through the ice.

But let me say that Bill smiled so broadly when he finished telling me that now the bear has no ramp, she jumps up into her den easily, the shaking has stopped and they have one great polar bear in North Bay.

I cannot but think that Bill’s statement “I want our kids to see....” was the leaven that changed everything.

I know that our congregational work and witness is changing and we need some new ways of being fed -- like how to help newcomers paw through the ice of being ‘new’ in the congregation. We need to be there with confidence because Christ is always with us and will show others how to become part of a caring community which will laugh with them and cry with them. After all, life challenges all of us and sooner or later we all need help building a ramp in our lives.

Like the bear, our congregations are losing some of the old and easy ways of being. We can’t do what we once did. But we can celebrate what’s right with the world and trust that it will release energy to fix what’s wrong.

So join me in looking for leaven. It leads to rejoicing, and that’s always good for the soul!!

--- Heather McLean



***“May we, together, turn to God, believing in the truth of God’s love and grace.
May we proclaim life. May we seek peace. May we find healing.
May we hold one another’s hands. May we walk with God into the future planned for us.
And may we break bread together at the great banquet.”***

Greetings to family, friends and co-workers in Japan, Canada, and around the world:

The snow lays thick and white upon the ground. It is good to take time to remember all of you and offer our deepest thanks for being together with us in this time and place that God has given to us. This past year has been a milestone for me since it has been more than 40 years since I arrived here in Japan in September 8, 1969.

The Dohoku Centre has had a busy year. I will share two major events, one joyful and one sad. In May, we were pleased to welcome a group of seven women from four different provinces across Canada for a period of ten days during which time they visited the Centre as well as all ten churches in the Dohoku (northern Hokkaido) Sub-district. This trip was arranged through Calling Lakes Centre in Fort Qu’Appelle, Saskatchewan, a United Church Centre with which we have a special relationship. It was a memorable time of sharing and growing together for all. Our Sub-district is already thinking of a visit to Saskatchewan and the CLC in 2011.

The sad event was the passing of our very dear and close friend Megumu Ono. His sudden death of the very rare disease mesothelioma in June was a great shock to us. He was only 58 and died after less than a week in hospital. We had worked together for more than twenty years. His wife died of cancer in 2000 in her early 40s and they leave 2 sons, both studying for the Christian ministry. They are a part of our ‘extended family’.

For the rest, with our co-worker, Kuriko Fujiyoshi, Keiko and I continue to plan and participate in Three Love Seminars (love for God, love for humanity, love for the soil) held twice a year at the Centre. The seminars look at issues and concerns of rural life and community as well as directions for the future. We conduct workshops on hunger and food security, hold an annual event that looks at the Bible from the perspective of agriculture, facilitate rural experiences for young people living in urban areas, and visit farm people all over Hokkaido to strengthen and expand the network of those who share Three Love values. This year the odometer on our car passed the 240,000 km mark.

The Dohoku Centre staff continue to work with the churches in the Sub-district. One of those churches, the Bibaushi Gospel Church, which has only two members, built a new sanctuary this year. Needless to say, this was only possible through the support of the entire Sub-district and churches and supporters throughout Japan, as well as some in Canada. On August 23rd, the day of the dedication of the new sanctuary, a double rainbow appeared right above the cross on the roof of the new building. We believe that this is a sign expressing God’s blessing and promise that even a church with only two people has a role to play in God’s plan. The pastors in the Sub-district have made hooded sweatshirts and T-shirts that have been sold to raise money for the church, and some of us have written campaign songs. One of the pastors and I have teamed up to visit several churches in Hokkaido and raise money for the church. There is a good feeling, a lot of laughter, and excitement in the air.

I have been busy this year with more speaking engagements than ever before on topics ranging from the social rehabilitation of people under psychiatric care, to agriculture and rural life, to Christian education and Christian faith. Many of those listening were not Christians and I hope that, in even a small way, I was able to point people in the direction of God’s love and the gospel of Christ that calls us to choose life.

I also chair the Ainu Issues Committee of the Hokkai District. The Ainu people are the aboriginal people of northern Japan and their history has been very similar to that of aboriginal people in Canada. In fact, it was only last year that

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“I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet ...”

REVELATION 1.10

We did hear exactly this, one Saturday, from a choral group of young people called Sounds of the Trumpet, who make and sing their own powerful religious songs. We recorded them in the Christian Council studio and then for their video clip shot them dancing at sites along the river on the way to the ocean (see photo).

A large part of our work is with musicians. Though none have shown up yet with trumpets, we’ve heard and recorded homemade guitars, goatskin drums, keyboard, wooden marimba, a harmonica, even accordion. We’re working with a 10-member choir called Adorai who finished first in a two-month weekly Gospel Show festival in Quelimane organized by the CCM Youth. Fourteen choirs took part and the winners were chosen by audience vote and a 3-member jury. We’ve just put an Adorai song on the soundtrack of a scene in a television drama we’ve been editing which also includes music of five different young women singers—3 soloists and a duo—and choirs from the cities of Milange and Gurue.

Last week we came back from the mountain village of Molumbo, a 6-hour drive from Quelimane, where we recorded

13 original songs by a group called Melody Musse. Musse is the name of a river where we shot footage for one of their videos. Melody Musse has songs to tell the stories of Adam and Eve in the Garden, Jesus with Satan in the Wilderness, the journey of the Magi, Zaqueus in the fig tree, and many more, all written by our young friend Atanasio, a health technician at Molumbo’s clinic. After splashing about with cameras in the River Musse we climbed the mountain that overlooks Molumbo to make video on the highest rock outcroppings, the group spontaneously singing as we made our way back down the mountain. At dusk we used the last useful light of a long day to shoot a simulated wedding in the Roman Catholic Church for their song called Christian Marriage.



harp, and tambourine—from Genesis and Exodus to Psalms and the Gospels where disciples sing a hymn (Mark 14.26), and on to Revelation. So are our lives in Mozambique. In a week we hear more live music than we might in months in Canada. To express themselves at their most intense—in joy or in sadness—people sing. They put their feelings not just into words but melody and rhythm and sometimes instruments, which might be as simple as a shaken gourd full of seeds or pebbles. And not just feeling: their songs put into song serious thought on matters happy or painful that most impact their lives—poverty, AIDS, violence, love sacred and/or romantic, faithfulness or bad faith, praise and thanks to God.

Heaven must have music. We know because the Bible’s angels sing. When our young musical friends get there to join them, they’ll make the place rock for the rest of eternity.

In mission and service, Karen and Bill Butt

..... continued from page 2

the Japanese government finally recognized them as aboriginal people. Each year, our Committee plans a study tour to some part of Hokkaido where we can meet with Ainu people and hear their stories. We are not trying to 'evangelize' Ainu people but to build a new relationship and find ways of working together as they seek to reclaim their dignity and their rights. This year we heard terrible stories about how the graves of Ainu people have been desecrated and robbed and the bones carried off to Hokkaido University for 'research' purposes. Please remember and pray for the Ainu people living and struggling in Japan today.

Keiko continues to be deeply involved in the Nayoro church which celebrated its 100th anniversary this year. After several years with no young children there are suddenly seven, all under the age of 5. It's almost impossible to measure the joy and expectation this has given to older members of the congregation. They just love all the noise that these children make.

The two recipe books that were put together in 1998 and 2001 by Three Love women, including Keiko, are still being reprinted every year and have now sold more than 10,000 copies. The national church newspaper, 'Friend of the Heart', has decided to do a year-long feature on them, introducing not only the recipes but also the problems and the possibilities that exist in rural Japan. Not bad for a little book they expected to staple together and simply share with friends.

In our family Manna, 33 years old, continues to work as an elementary school teacher in Dubai. This is her third year there and will likely be her last. Nathan, now 31, and Minori continue to run the Farmer's café in Nayoro. Nathan is in his fourth year at the café and has built up a clientele of regular customers. Martin, who is 28, continues his work in Yokohama and has been to various places in the world again this year.

Japan has a new government that is having difficulty, probably because it has had so little experience governing. It is not yet clear where they are really trying to go. The yen remains strong which is not good for an export economy like Japan's. The suicide rate remains high and the vacuum in values continues. People are not looking for hope in established religions, including the Christian church. Remember this country in God's plan.

We are here, doing what we do, only because of your prayers and your continued support of our work. We thank you all and we ask that you remember the church in Japan. May we, together, turn to God, believing in the truth of God's love and grace. May we proclaim life. May we seek peace. May we find healing. May we hold one another's hands. May we walk with God into the future planned for us. And may we break bread together at the great banquet.

*God's richest blessings to you all during the season of celebration and throughout 2010,
Rob & Keiko Witmer*

Heart of Germany and Oberammergau. September 17-30, 2010. Join David McKane on a Craig Travel Tour and follow the footsteps of Martin Luther, meet his wife, Katharina von Bora, explore the Reformation, visit Buchenwald and remember Dietrich Bonhoeffer, among others, who opposed Hitler, visit Nuremburg and finish with Christ's passion portrayed at Oberammergau, the village in which the play has been celebrated every ten years since 1634. Join us for this wonderful tour of the heart of Germany. Call David at 519-679-8182 or Craig Travel at 1-800-387-8890.

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High Definition Spirituality

Many people have heard about our financial appeal recently it has been in church bulletins and on our screens. That's the only reason I have lost all element of surprise!

But on the other hand I can now relax and sink down into this act of fellowship. I don't know exactly how much money we receive each month for offerings at White Oaks United Church. The exact amount isn't that important ... it may be eight or nine thousand dollars. What is important is that this is a huge sum of money. The Miracle of White Oaks is that this huge sum is made up of what we have somehow scraped together!

But we also hear of a sizable deficit. At White Oaks it's about twenty thousand dollars. In these economic times I am sure every church has a deficit. But think for a moment! The size of the deficit cannot possibly reflect the faithfulness and stewardship we actually have toward each other! If we are not careful one might be lulled into a perception that White Oaks is 'sickly' or is in some way lacking in faithfulness.

It is not! The truth is that we already give huge sums of money to the life and work of the church and I believe we live up to all our commitment in God's eyes. For what does the LORD require of us but to do justice, to love in kindness and to walk humbly with our God?

Having said all this, we look around every Sunday and the individual struggles of our people are never very far from us. White Oaks is much greater than the sum of our individual parts. For this we can be grateful because this is the very handiwork of God and this is the proper reflection of our selflessness and our wholeness. The predominance of fellowship and mutual concern in this house is the proper reflection of our livelihood and joy.

I believe we can be forgiven if a deficit doesn't really make sense to us. But, unfortunately, it cannot be ignored. Our stewards warned that painful cuts will be made soon. Cuts that do not reflect the actual livelihood of White Oaks but will certainly compromise our beliefs and vision ... and compromise the whole structure of our livelihood.

This prompted some discussion ... things we could do ... plans of action ... and rather than choosing one I thought that we could float them all out there ... they really are quite good. Here are some ideas to make it as painless as possible to ourselves and others. Our minister suggested that a monthly amount withdrawn each month by PAR, pre-authorized remittance, makes it easier for members to contribute. Next, if one is already on PAR, by adding an extra twenty to the offering plate every once in a while we could take a bite out of the deficit. Another suggestion was to add 'another month' to the year and give thirteen equal shares just like the baker's dozen. Or subscribe to High Definition Spirituality and give the equal of a cable bill. (This will add to your television enjoyment!)

With the faithful sums we already collect, each person can be asked to come up with a solution of their own that works especially for him or her. This is important to understand. We can prevail over something we do not understand -- with what we do understand. In other words, we can fight the fires of financial distress with the fires of mutual concern and generosity. This we DO understand!

I end this with a paraphrase from 2 Maccabees: If this is well told and sheds light on the situation ... then this is what we desired. If it is poorly done and you feel as though we are twisting arms ... then it was only the best we could do.

Jim Peden, White Oaks United Church

Editor's Note: White Oaks exceeded their budget and their M&S objective. Jim Peden built them a ramp! See 'Looking for Leaven' article on page 1.

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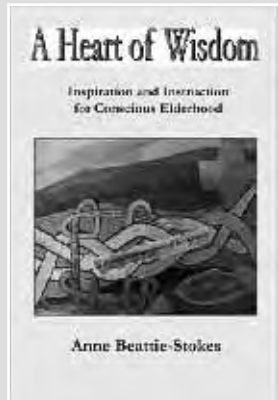
Debbi Jarvis / Middlesex Presbytery Resource Centre



A Heart of Wisdom

The wisdom that we hope to attain with each passing year is probed in this beautiful book of poetry, personal reflection and stories. It is about understanding, accepting and appreciating the changes physically, emotionally, and spiritually that you encounter as you approach your final destination. The author is an artist and photographer as well as a writer and Ordained Minister, and as an avid paddler, hiker and camper she has brought all these talents to bear, in making this book a true work of beauty.

Author Anne Beattie-Stokes is Minister at White Oaks United Church in London.



9781439225172

There's no ATM in the Wilderness

Daily Reflections for Lent

This insightful book has been written by a group whose members are very diverse in their perspectives about what is truly important in our lives.

The subject of these daily thoughts is one that is certainly timely as we begin a new decade in unsteady financial times -- and we are all concerned for our future.

The study guide aims to help small groups look at such topics as:

- Our relationship with money and how it affects our relationship with God, other people and the world
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- What the bible says about money and how our faith calls us to respond to money issues in our lives



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Life & Faith is a locally created television program on the three A-Channel stations located in London, Windsor and Wingham and across Canada on ExpressVu and StarChoice.

What kind of world do you want to live in? Then invest in it!

If you like high-flying investments and the high-risk sector then you should stop reading now: the following information is not for you. If, on the other hand, you would like to learn how to invest ethically, collect dividends, and maximize tax exemptions—all while supporting the Church's local and international missions—then read on.

Every time we recite 'A New Creed' we define the world we want to live in. It is a world in which we:

- celebrate God's presence
- live with respect in Creation
- love and serve others
- seek justice and resist evil
- proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen our judge and our hope

This is our Christian call to stewardship. And it is the ethical code that should drive every decision that we make about the use of our time, talents and treasure. The past couple of years have been pretty disillusioning for those who have invested their hard-earned funds with the hope of having a little security in retirement. Big fund managers got outrageously rich while bankrupting their own investment firms. Many pension funds went kaput.

So it was with some trepidation that I opened my pension statement from The United Church of Canada. A pleasant surprise awaited. The United Church has managed its funds so well and exercised such good stewardship that its pensioners saw an increase in their monthly cheques and those of us who are still paying in to the plan didn't lose anything.

This is proof positive that sound management using ethical investment strategies that focus on the world in which we would like to live do work. The fund managers for both the United Church and the United Church of Canada Foundation are directed to manage their investment funds according to the Church's strict ethical investment principles. At last report 99% of these funds are invested in ethically sound endeavours. And the good news is that you can benefit from the United Church's ethical investment practices.

For individuals, both Charitable Gift Annuities and Charitable Remainder Trusts provide the donor with an income for life and a generous receipt that can be used to reduce taxes. In addition, your chosen beneficiary will receive a gift at the end of your life. For congregations, the United Church of Canada Foundation provides the opportunity to invest your funds with the peace of mind that they are invested and growing according to the Church's ethical principals.

It's a win-win opportunity. You benefit from the Church's ethical investment practices, and your gift to its local, national or international missions becomes an investment in the kind of world that you want for future generations.

*FROM A SUBMISSION BY REV. CAROLYN RONALD, KAMLOOPS, BC

Want more information? Call/Email Lisa Di Veto at 519-754-1803 or ldiveto@united-church.ca

Coming Events



FIVE OAKS PROGRAMS

For information or to register, telephone (519) 442-3212 or visit www.fiveoaks.on.ca



March 8 - 10 - Keeping the Faith in a Culture of Consumerism with John Bell - Explore 3 realities: God, Money and the Western World. Look at how scripture deals with money, why it is often the last issue Christians talk about, and how we enable the next generation to move from the consumerist mentality.

March 26 - 28 - Confirmation Weekend III: Revelations - For experienced confirmation groups - explore what you learned in confirmation and what it means to you now and in the future.

April 6 - 8 - Spiritual Practices: Starting with the Body - Come help with our spring cleaning work camp. Breaks for chapel & fellowship. Meals/accommodation are provided.

April 23 - 25 - Neos: Youth Ministry in an Intercultural World - In an ever-changing world come & explore with Adele

Halliday & others what intercultural ministry might mean when working with youth.

UNITED CHURCH WOMEN

For information or for registration details telephone Marilyn Mitchell 519-762-3335.

April 18 & 19, 2010 - Annual Gathering - The London Conference United Church Women Annual Gathering at Parkview United Church in Stratford. Theme 'One More Step Along the World I Go'. Theme Speaker: Michelle Owens of Atwood United. Study: Anne Martin from National Office. Register by March 23. For more info: 1-519-485-1169.

April 30 to May 2, 2010 - Westminster Weekend - This wonderful, enlivening and inspiring weekend is being held at the Best Western Stoneridge Inn, London.

July 24, 2010 - Summer Event - An exciting event is planned for a summer's day at Siloam United Church in London.

Youth Forum

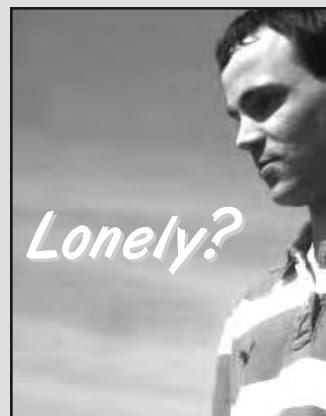
FOR AND ABOUT YOUTH & YOUNG ADULTS

A regular column that invites contributions from youth & young adults of London Conference.

Where Do YOU Stand?



Hungry 4 answers?



“To me, Youth Forum was like a second family to me. Everyone got along so well together that I wish we could’ve stayed together longer! I made great new friends that I hope will last a long time. I hope that I get to see most people that were there, at different get-togethers and even the next Youth Forum. *(sic)*

I learned and now understand more about the United Church. I’m also more aware of Darfur than before.

I enjoyed the entire weekend and I am thinking about being a planner in a couple years. I would definitely encourage other young people from my church to sign up for it, because it will be one of the highlights of their year.”

*Lexi Morrison
Lambton Presbytery*



Youth Forum 2010

Thursday night - April 15 to Sunday - April 18