



“Do You Know the Way?” 194th Annual Convention Meets in San Jose to Find Out

BY HERB ZIEGLER

Delegates, ministers, and friends gathered at San Jose State University in California (SJSU) for a week of service, prayer, learning, discovery, conversation, and camaraderie from June 30 to July 5, 2018. The Council of Ministers and the General Council extended their stays for their meetings.

As people arrived on Sunday afternoon, old friends reconnected and new friendships began with introductions and conversations. After dinner, everyone gathered for the welcome address from the president, Rev. Jane Siebert (page 87), followed by the keynote address.

The Keynote Address

The keynote address¹ was delivered by Curtis Childs, the digital media producer at the Swedenborg Foundation and host of the weekly web series “Swedenborg & Life” on the *offTheLeftEye* YouTube channel². There, he

interviews individuals knowledgeable about Emanuel Swedenborg and his writings, Christianity, and religions. He also produces pithy videos for *offTheLeftEye*, targeted at young adults,



Curtis Childs

to give them more accessible insights into the value and meaning of Christianity through a Swedenborgian lens, although it appeals to people of all ages with its creative explorations and high production values.

Even those who had watched some of Curtis’s videos were surprised and delighted that he was not only professional, well informed, and entertaining but relaxed and casual as well. He did not give a pat presentation (he speaks in public

often) but, rather, spoke to the theme of our convention “Do You Know the

eo hosted by creator and producer Curtis Childs. “Swedenborg & Life,” which streams every Monday at 8:00 PM ET, launched in 2014. The weekly web series adds depth to the channel’s short video repertoire as well as viewing consistency for the 60,000+ subscribers. Visit *offTheLeftEye* on YouTube to see the videos.

Way?” “Do You Know the Way to San Jose?©” is the title of a popular song from 1968, written by Burt Bacharach and Hal David, and sung by Dionne Warwick. It is a catchy pop tune, with originality in the music and wisdom in the lyrics.

For the purposes of his talk, Curtis treated the lyrics as Dionne Warwick’s creation. He projected them verse by verse on a screen while analyzing them from a Swedenborgian perspective.

Speaking in a relaxed and friendly manner and using humor effectively to keep the audience awake and receptive, he proposed that the song is written entirely in correspondences and that the song sums up the entirety of Swedenborg’s message!

He projected the first verse.

*Do you know the way to San Jose?
I’ve been away so long, I may go wrong and
lose my way
Do you know the way to San Jose?
I’m going back to find some peace of mind
in San Jose*

Curtis then noted that “peace” refers to heaven, as in *Heaven & Hell* §285: “There are two things at the heart of heaven, innocence and peace.”

Curtis continued, “Swedenborg says that to truly understand something we have to know its opposite. So what’s she getting away from?” He paused before answering, “Hell, which is what is

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¹ Video: <https://tinyurl.com/curtiskeynote2018>
² The *offTheLeftEye* YouTube channel explores faith, spirituality, and the afterlife through vid-

The Editor's Desk



Convention Once Again

You'd think I'd get tired of them but I never do. I am annually renewed in love and wisdom when I attend the annual convention of the Swedenborgian Church.

I have two roles there, and they sometimes conflict but are usually complementary. As editor and producer of *the Messenger*, I am there to record people and events for publication. I must attend all events and pay attention. (Mini-courses are the biggest challenge since I cannot be in several places at once.) As a participant, I

get personally involved in issues being discussed and become emotionally involved in creative experiences such as musical performances and worship services. It's not hard, but it's a little confusing at times.

This convention was no exception to my experiences at conventions in the past. It didn't hurt that the weather was paradisiacal, seventies in daytime and sixties at night, bright sun, low humidity, a light breeze, and clear skies. But as always, the best part was the chance to renew old friendships, make new friends, have stimulating conversations, and be in community with a large group of people from all around North America.

take in a theater performance, and more than I have room to describe.

Like the annual conventions, this was a time and place to let myself indulge in memories with friends from long ago who once were a vital community, and we still are in a sense. We see each other every five years at the old stomping grounds and relish the symposia and discussion groups where we merge our former selves with our present selves, discussing the past, our life journeys, current events, and how to be of use at this stage in our lives. We learn from each other and emerge refreshed and renewed.

—Herb Ziegler

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50 Years Later

In May I attended my fiftieth college reunion at Oberlin College—1968. What a long time ago fifty years is, but how present my younger self emerges from time to time, particularly at a reunion. When I graduated, the fiftieth reunion class had graduated in 1918. To my 1968 self, 1918 existed in the remote past, along with the nineteenth century. World War I ended in 1918!

As I walked the campus and attended events, I felt admiration and compassion for the graduates, and I forgave them their inability to see me, an old guy they didn't know. I gloried in the many opportunities to enjoy musical performances, visit the art museum,

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Church Calendar

- **October 5–8:** SCYL Columbus Day weekend retreat, Cedar Hill Retreat Center · Duxbury, Massachusetts
- **November 9–10:** General Council Fall Meeting, Swedenborg Library, Chicago

the Messenger

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Published monthly except July and August by the Standing Committee for Communication and Information of the Swedenborgian Church of North America (founded 1817, incorporated 1861 as the General Convention of the New Jerusalem in the United States of America), Rev. Jane Siebert, president.

September 2018

Volume 240, No. 7, Whole Number 5432

Editor, design and production: Herbert Ziegler

Copy editing and proofing: Robert Leith, Samantha Johanson, & Trevor

Standing Committee for Communication and Information: Elizabeth Blair, Val Brugler & Katie Pruiett

Printing: Gnomon Copy, Cambridge MA

Editorial Address:

Herb Ziegler, *the Messenger*

2 Hancock Place

Cambridge MA 02139

Tel: 617.388.0252

Email: messenger@swedenborg.org

Business and Subscription Address:

The Messenger, Central Office

50 Quincy Street

Cambridge MA 02138

Tel: 617.969.4240

Email: manager@swedenborg.org

Subscriptions: free online subscription at <http://swedenborg.org>. Printed and mailed to US address, \$20/year; to Canada address, \$30/year; to all other addresses, \$35/year; single copies, \$2.00. Libraries & prisoners, free. Send check made out to "Swedenborgian Church" with "Messenger" on the memo line. Other requests, write or call Central Office.

Deadline for submissions is three weeks before the first day of the month of issue.

The opinions and views expressed are those of the authors, not of *the Messenger*, the Communication Support Unit, or the Swedenborgian Church.

The President's Annual Convention Address

President Rev. Siebert began her address with the lyrics of "The Times They Are A-Changin'," written by Bob Dylan in 1964.

Come gather 'round people
Wherever you roam
And admit that the waters
Around you have grown
And accept it that soon
You'll be drenched to the bone
If your time to you is worth savin'
Then you better start swimmin' or you'll
sink like a stone
For the times they are a-changin'

Come writers and critics
Who prophesize with your pen
And keep your eyes wide
The chance won't come again
And don't speak too soon
For the wheel's still in spin
And there's no tellin' who that it's namin'
For the loser now will be later to win
For the times they are a-changin'

Come senators, congressmen
Please heed the call
Don't stand in the doorway
Don't block up the hall
For he that gets hurt
Will be he who has stalled
There's a battle outside and it is ragin'
It'll soon shake your windows and rattle
your walls
For the times they are a-changin'

Come mothers and fathers
Throughout the land
And don't criticize
What you can't understand
Your sons and your daughters
Are beyond your command
Your old road is rapidly agin'
Please get out of the new one if you can't
lend your hand
For the times they are a-changin'

The line it is drawn
The curse it is cast
The slow one now
Will later be fast
As the present now
Will later be past
The order is rapidly fadin'
And the first one now will later be last
For the times they are a-changin'

REV. JANE SIEBERT

I was in the eighth grade when this song came out, anxious to head into high school, in the middle of the tumultuous sixties. Many of you here remember this time. Others may remember their parents, or even grandparents, talking about it. We were ready for change, singing for change, chanting for change, marching for change. It was a very difficult time. President John F. Kennedy, Rev. Martin Luther King, and Senator Robert Kennedy were assassinated, the Viet Nam War was raging, friends were being drafted, and civil rights protests streamed into the streets. The sixties were recorded as a decade that changed history.

And yet, I recall the sixties with pride and optimism. We rallied together to oppose the problems we saw in society. There was a sense of community and support. Oh, not everyone agreed on what was needed, but I don't remember the divide and dissension within our country. Of course, I was a teen. But we really believed we could make a difference and effect the change that was needed in our country and our world.

Bob Dylan's song was an anthem for us, frustrated youth that would soon be hippies. This is one of Dylan's songs that led to his Nobel Peace Prize for Literature in 2016. As I read the lyrics of this song, it is still a rallying cry.

So where are we today? It's easy to



In the same year that Dylan wrote this song, the *Los Angeles Times* carried a list of daily Bible readings for the upcoming week.

look back at the "good ole days" and reminisce, and then fall into the dark side, thinking things are worse now than when Bob Dylan wrote "The Times They Are A-Changin'." But a lot has changed and much of it for the better. I doubt anyone in the sixties would have thought it possible in fifty years to have an African-American

President. More women are in congress and holding high ranking business positions. Same-sex marriages are legal in the USA and at least twenty-four other countries. There has been change—good change, positive change. We have further to go we know; some of our inequalities and discriminations are very evident, and we hold to our friend Swedenborg who assures us we have to be able to see the problems first before we can do anything about them. And many of them are glaringly evident.

When I listen to these words from Bob Dylan, I continue to hear a call to action. There has been a lot of change in the fifty-plus years since Dylan wrote this song—and things, they still are a-changing, and need to change.

What has happened in religion in the fifty-plus years since this song was released? In the same year that Dylan wrote this song, the *Los Angeles Times* carried a list of daily Bible readings for the upcoming week. Can you imagine a national newspaper today encouraging people to read their Bibles? It was the era when, if you didn't attend

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Ordination Message

Making Mirrors Out of Windows

BY RACHEL MADJERAC

It is a common occurrence in seminary classrooms for professors to ask you to share or reflect upon your call to ministry. Now, that may seem like a pretty obvious thing to ask a room full of seminary students, but there was just one tiny problem: it was a question that I didn't have a great answer for. I got the idea that I wanted to become a minister when I was fifteen, then I finished high school, graduated from college, and moved to California to start seminary because that was the plan. It didn't seem like it had to be any more complicated than that to me.

Yet, as I sat in classrooms and listened to people around the circle—because we always had to sit in circles in seminary—they all seemed to have these great or profound answers, whether that they grew up in the church and everyone knew from when they were very little that they would become a minister, or they had a first-hand, transcendent experience of the Divine, or they were an alcoholic and it was faith that pulled them up from their rock bottom. And then it would get to me and my response was more or less, “Well, it just made sense.”

In deciding what I wanted to talk about tonight, I thought it would be a good time to think about this question a bit more with you all, which



Rev. Rachel Madjerac

at this point could simply be asked as “Why am I here?” or “Why are you here?” And I don't mean this in a big, exciting, destiny sort of way, but quite literally why you are all here in this room today. The obvious answer being that we are here because of a shared faith, because of our religion. But to me that's more of a “what” than a “why” response. Now, I'm not going to get into what the point of religion is, but I do want us to think about why we are religious and what being a religious person means to each of us.

“Why are you religious?” is not a question that I have ever been asked di-

going to church camp. Or when you were at a dinner party and after asking you what you do for a living and hearing your response that you are a chaplain, you felt it in the tone of the voice of the man who took it upon himself to spend thirty minutes telling you that religion is a crutch for the stupid, poor, and useless. It's in the moment of confusion that occurs when you're trying to make plans with friends and you say you can't do brunch on Sunday because you have church. In these moments this question of why is deeply embedded into the responses and reactions of those around us.

As much as every fiber of my being cringes when I can feel people questioning why I am religious or why I go to church, I've found that there is a reaction that is much more upsetting. On too many occasions my identity as a Christian has been understood to mean that I am hateful and intolerant. In most instances it is a mis-

communication from ignorance, in which the person doesn't actually know anyone who is religious and is basing their view of Christians on what they see in the media or what they remember from history class.

Most times people are quick to grasp that I am not homophobic or xenophobic or condemning in whatever way they assumed I was going to be, yet hardly ever do they seem to translate that to a greater understanding that



Rachel Madjerac is ordained by Rev. Jane Siebert. (L to R) Revs. Jim Lawrence, Kit Billings, Dave Brown, Junchol Lee, Jane Siebert, Anna Woofenden, Kathy Speas, and Jenn Tafel.

rectly. Yet, it is one I have faced countless times, and I'm going to guess that many of you have, too. That time you took vacation time off from work and when a co-worker asked you where you were going you saw a quizzical look on their face after you told them you were

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Ordination Message

The New Jerusalem: Resistance is Futile

CORY BRADFORD-WATTS

Scripture Readings: Deuteronomy 12:8-11, Revelation 21:22-26

It's often hard to explain how the Lord works in our lives, isn't it? It can be difficult to put into words all the ways that we see Goddess in the little things, the things no one else may get. So we often make jokes or little anecdotes that may help inspire some understanding, maybe inspire some reflection and introspection from our listener. And what we often find is that we have to listen to others in order to know how to truly support the divinity so plainly on their faces and in their hearts. When we speak to others where they are at, it acknowledges a deep truth in relation to our denominational theme this past year, that everyone knows their own way to the heavenly New Jerusalem deep within and around them. I've heard this sentiment from all of you as I've journeyed to ordination, and you've shared all the ways that your ministries touch the world, and whether you call yourself a minister or not, ministry is exactly what you do, and hearing about it, experiencing it, is quite inspirational and supportive. So, thank you.

It's this effort toward listening to others, uplifting and connecting with them that often motivates us to turn



Rev. Cory Bradford-Watts

toward shared experiences, to even turn toward pop culture and modern society, in order to help us paint a more personal picture about divinity, one that can be better digested by those we encounter. Using topical culture ties theology into others' views of the world, helping to uplift spiritual connection and personal insight. In fact, that's exactly what Curtis did at the opening of the convention with the song "Do You Know the Way to San Jose?" which was quite wonderful.

In that vein, I want to share a little bit about myself that I don't often preach from, but something I think may resonate with you. I love a lot of

they did for me when I was a kid.

As I grew up, fantasy worlds often offered a mental escape from harassment, from being ostracized and feeling awkward in school. I'd often make up stories late at night in some of these different worlds in order to hold off sleeping, to hold off going to school in the morning, because school brought pain, and fantasy brought freedom. Such a mundane occurrence—going to school—but one I dreaded for many years. I was often made fun of as a kid; I wasn't athletic, and I was often relatively quite heavy, something that some of my peers latched onto and so would call me names. To many it was funny that I was tall and couldn't play basketball or it was strange that I wasn't quite white or black, that I was awkward, and, unfortunately, these were the days before more "woke" bullying initiatives. When I was really young, I often responded by being a bully myself. But having to switch school systems with what seemed to me like little rhyme or reason, I became ever more shy, sad, and insular heading into middle school and beyond. We also didn't have a car, which made it hard to go to after-school groups, and so my main solace

was family and my eventual connection with the Salvation Army and their youth programs. But I needed another escape. Fantasy, sci-fi, in my head and otherwise, allowed for that.

Even a show like *Star Trek*, often



Cory Bradford-Watts is ordained by Rev. Jane Siebert. (L to R) Revs. Jim Lawrence, Kit Billings, Dave Brown, Junchol Lee, Jane Siebert, Anna Woofenden, Jenn Tafel, and Kathy Speas.

nerdy entertainment: *Star Trek*, *Batman*, *Marvel*—pretty popular stuff nowadays. Most of them have pretty absurd, fantastical premises that we've become largely accustomed to and fond of. Indeed, fantasies can help provide an escape from harsh realities, as

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The New Jerusalem

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stereotyped as the brainiest of the bunch, generally operates from fantasy. It uses a set of fantastical scientific assumptions made up in the writers' room in order to fit a world with teleportation, mind-melding, and interdimensional, time-traveling beings. And despite the apparent dichotomy between our world and Star Trek's, most of the stuff in that show actually seems pretty reasonable to us. Like other fantasies, Star Trek is easy to enter: the "trippyness" of its universe is often believable. I wonder why.

Well, I can think of a theologian pretty popular with this crowd who talks about similarly trippy stuff. We can also read a lot of near-death experiences with these attributes: people describe surreal environments and explore what sounds like a fantasy world—one that, strangely, makes sense to us. I think that's why these stories speak to us: because their metaphysics resemble spiritual metaphysics that we don't know we already know, a spiritual reality that we long for.

Just as we heard from Curtis, many poetic and narrative arcs tend to resemble the Divine arc of scripture: symbolic stories of transformation, justice, hope and love, often providing uplifting glimmers of God, a type of refuge in a harsh world. These are artistic expressions of what I think we yearn for: a world where no one goes hungry, where positive transformation is the reality; a New Jerusalem where evil is relatively harmless and often just laughed at, where San Jose really is just a paradise, a world where no one is abused, kidnapped, or harassed, where Goddess wipes every tear from our eyes, and where the presence of the sun really means that everything is ok and getting better.

Unfortunately though, we're not entirely in that world yet. We live in a

world of injustice, bullies, and evil social structures. Being fed, housed, and getting medical attention are privileges in the USA—not offerings, not gifts, definitely not rights. The only rights, the only socialist institutions really benefitting from a right to exist in the USA, are the military, the police, prisons, financial systems, and the government itself, which undercuts the idea that socialism is always evil—no, socialism is a privilege reserved for just a few. In the USA's version of capitalism, a purely profit-centric one, the well-being and rehabilitation of the convicted and of addicts are considered threats to our prisons' bottom lines, threats to fear mongering and weapon sales, because otherwise, real efforts toward reintegration might exist. If you're convicted of a felony at age eighteen, and many are, the system decimates your chance of finding work at thirty, fifty, seventy, eighty—does that sound like the Kingdom of God? The New Jerusalem? Generally, and it may not include most of you reading this, we've given up trying to obtain that Queendom of Bliss, we reject the idea of a "*Kin-dom*" of Harmony. At least, that's the way it often seems, doesn't it?

Today, public corporations, including many prison systems, are considered people . . . when it comes to the benefits of the law in the USA. But a corporation can't be tried in a court of law as a person, not for manslaughter, and not for murder or vast negligence. BP and Goldman Sachs have no marks on their records, no felonies over their heads; they get work just fine. They get the benefit of personhood, with none of the horrendous, systematic, lifelong downsides that apply to those of us who are actually people. There are even systematic protections in place to prevent corporations from starving at the expense of the rest of us. For prisons, their corporate welfare includes a lack of reintegration efforts and a lack of mental health systems. Wealthy people

invest in them and reflect on ways to make them more profitable. Well, where's the systematic stake in our livelihood? Where's the financial stake in the lifeblood of real people, of veterans, the poor, the downtrodden . . . of you?

Often, nowhere in sight, on the periphery if at all, justice is cast down into nooks and crannies, struggling to survive. The idea that this country is for the people and by the people is a fantasy, it's the fantasy of our lives. We're very selective in who we define as real people in society, who at any one moment gets free reign to pursue happiness. Even when we see through parts of it, the fantasy of our gleaming society feels often heartwarming: it's nice, it's distracting. It helps us to sleep at night, this imagined reality. It helps us to forget and neglect the suffering, the dying, the abused, and the abusers. We neglect the bigoted, the mentally ill, the physically ill, the abducted and the trafficked, the orphaned, the drowning, the deported, the shunned, separated, starved, and the imprisoned.

But like a TV show, our fantasy about the real world speaks to us because it echoes a realm that we typically don't know that we know. We often have heavenly, New Jerusalem blinders on. But we have to acknowledge we're not there yet. I'd like to claim that I'll be fully ordained in a few minutes, that I'll be 100 percent a minister, but I'm not quite there yet. This ordination is a call to lean into and fully accept that responsibility.

In the New Jerusalem, we would never stand for injustice, no matter the selfish gain. We would seek out oppression and wrongs and try to right them with rehabilitation, not more abuse, not with apathy. In Swedenborg's visions, the heavenly New Jerusalem is a realm where housing, clothing, food, and healthcare are provided for by the Lady, by her heavenly system and her people. It's a place where

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The New Jerusalem

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everyone works, not because they have to, but because leaning into goodness, leaning into good lives, is considered work enough, and it brings abundance, it brings peace. We're told that most of the abundance and profit of each person is shared freely with all in this pluralistic heaven, indeed, shared and naturally multiplied to uplift their neighbors. Uplifting goodness, wisdom, and joy in others is the only profit that truly matters in the heavenly New Jerusalem.

In our scripture readings today, we are given a glimpse of this realm. In fact, we're given a glimpse of what many consider to be an earthly, material New Jerusalem—a promise of what is possible right here—where we no longer harm our neighbors or nature but uplift the love of God in each other. In fact, we're told there are no temples there, and no sun or moon, because the Lamb is its temple and its heat and light. Like in a fairy tale, the brightness of day there means that everything is okay, and there is no night.

Part of the beauty of this New Jerusalem in Scripture is that it's described as descending onto the earth. A descending, heavenly city, open to all who choose goodness. It has an inevitability to it, an ongoing process that is finding us. And that's exactly what the prophecy indicates—that the city will descend, that it is descending, not that it might. I think this inevitability should give us hope and gratitude. It may often feel like we fail to create the New Jerusalem, but the city descends anyway, through us, around us, in a spiral dance. We can lean into that idea when we're fearful or anxious, looking for inspiration to continue, maybe even

feeling like we're not doing enough. Indeed, we can always do more, but remember that it's not your strength that you embody, it's Goddess's strength and God's vulnerability.

The idea of the Holy City shouldn't be used as an excuse for inaction but instead as an excuse to accept the inevitable pressure on our spirits and world to allow the holy, pluralistic city to continue to emerge, an excuse to be somewhat easy on ourselves while also being zealous, to lean into our good habits—habits of justice and outreach—and away from our dire ones, understanding that we're not entirely there yet, but it's coming, it's still coming. We will

be ordained if we so choose.

Strangely enough, the inevitability of the descending city reminds me of something out of Star Trek. Now I'm going to “nerd out” just a little!

In Star Trek, the Borg (yes like Swedenborg) are largely considered to be villains. They're bullies.

They strive to force all beings to assimilate into their collective, hive mind, with the tag line, “Resistance is futile.” The Borg share a consciousness and say that they actually become more blissful the more beings that they add because each addition expands the hive mind. Sound familiar?

However, in practice they are cruel, violent, and cookie-cutter. Like the New Jerusalem, Borg ships have many gates in all directions that are constantly open . . . but they force people through them. Like Heaven, the only other option to joining the Borg collective is a type of death, but the Borg are the ones who do the killing. And like the description the book of Revelation gives of the descending New

Jerusalem, each Borg ship is in the shape of a perfect cube, but unlike Heaven, where those dimensions may represent the triune oneness of love, wisdom, and action, for the Borg this descending cube represents the box that they will force you into. May we not be Borg, but Swedenborgians, acknowledging that love, diversity, and freedom are the only things that are truly futile to resist.

Amen? ☸

Election Results

Elections were conducted per both the then-current Constitution and By-laws and the amended versions. The amendments having passed, the following people were elected to the offices as listed:

- President: Jane Siebert
(second term, to begin in 2019)
- Vice-president: Tom Neuenfeldt
- Recording secretary:
Karen Conger
- Treasurer: Jennifer Lindsay
(term to begin in 2019)
- General Council, laypersons:
Stan Conger and Rob Lawson
- General Council, clergy:
Rev. Jenny Caughman
- Standing Committee for
Communication and Information:
Rev. Elizabeth Blair and
Val Brugler
- Standing Committee for Financial
Accountability: Rev. Lisa Solwold
and Rev. Sage Cole
- Standing Committee for Education
and Resources for Spiritual
Community:
Rev. Robert McCluskey and
Rev. Julie Conaron
- Nominating Committee:
Dr.. Rebecca Esterson
- Committee on Admission to the
Ministry: clergy:
Rev. Sage Cole



Mirrors Out of Windows

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Christianity and religious people in general are not necessarily those things either. But worse than this is when upon hearing that I am Christian, someone assumes that I share their hatred or their racism. As if my religion signifies to them that it is now safe to express all of the terrible beliefs that they hold because they assume that I too must feel that way. Thankfully, the latter occurs far less often, but there still seems to be a real disconnect between how we as religious people understand the role of our faith, to how people who aren't religious see religious people.

Now, I certainly don't have a resolution to this problem as a whole, but I have two assumptions that I hold to be true that I have found many non-religious people that I am confronted with are not necessarily familiar with. The first being that religion is our way of talking to God, not God's way of talking to us. There are many reasons this feels obvious to me. God the creator is talking to everyone all the time. Why would there need to be human institutions in order for God to talk to us. Plus, there are so many different religious traditions that have developed so different types of people can connect with the Divine in a way that makes sense to them—there is a multitude of people, but only one God.

The second implicit belief that I hold is that what is true in religion is true because it is true. It is not true because it is in the religion. Faith is not a blind adherence to a set of rules, it is a commitment to what is good and true; it is a covenant with God to work to create heaven here on earth. Because of its nature as a relationship, faith is



dynamic not static. When I was introduced to Swedenborgian theology, it not only fit with how I experienced the world but more importantly, it pushed me to change how I understood that world. Being a religious person, being a religious leader, is about working to discern what God is doing in our midst. It's looking at how the world was, at what the world is, and towards what it must be.

In my experience the light of faith makes mirrors out of windows. It takes what is already around us and reflects it back on us. It gives us perspective on things we weren't able to see before and gives us a view of the bigger picture. In *Arcana Coelestia* §5128 [3], Swedenborg writes that "Divine light is either reflected or suffocated or perverted." We can live without any faith at all, we can live with a perverted and deluded faith, or we can live with a faith that is illuminated by the light of heaven. In the index to *Arcana*, under "mirror," it reads in part,

Goods and truths, which are of the light of heaven, appear in those which are of natural light as in a mirror or representative image. The appearance of life in truth is really from good, as an image in a mirror is not in it, but is an influx of the figure. Those who are in natural good, not spiritual, do not possess the mirror, so to call it, by which truths are reflected from interiors.

Our inner spiritual selves are working through our outer natural selves as we live and act in the world. Yet, this isn't something that everyone can see automatically. It is that connection, that insight into the interior goodness and truth, that comes from faith.

Being a religious person is about

finding a faith or a belief system that not only makes sense with the life you have lived and with the world around you, but that also calls you to not be complicit when you know something isn't right; it charges you with the task of trying to do something about it. So, why am I here? Why am I religious? Because it makes sense. Amen. ☪

Business Sessions

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Francesca McCrossan and
Samantha Johanson

the registration table and seeing that everyone was housed and oriented, among other tasks.

- Thanks to Nick and Nancy Leras for providing the entertainer Olivier Suzor for the picnic.

Convention 2019

Barb Halle and Rev. Kit Billings of the LaPorte New Church offered an invitation to Annual Convention 2019,



in Valparaiso, Indiana, at Valparaiso University, sponsored by the Illinois Association.

President Siebert announced Annual Convention 2020 will be held in Bridgewater, Massachusetts, and that Annual Convention 2021 is tentatively set to be held in Fryeburg, Maine. ☪

Kids at the Annual Convention

Thanks to parents, families, friends, and General Convention, a lot of children showed up for an annual convention adventure and learning experience. Under the care and guidance of Charlie and Holly Bauer, the children learned about survival, physical and spiritual, and assembled their own physical and spiritual survival kits. In addition to their lessons, they had plenty

of time to play outside in the fantastic San Jose weather of that week. They got to experience the giant Coastal Redwoods on our convention outing to Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park. And, when they returned to campus and after finishing their hot dogs at the July 4th picnic, they dove into the costumes and street performance paraphernalia brought by Olivier Suzor, our entertainer for the evening. Every child had a turn at the music box, choosing a paper roll to crank through it, and most explored several outfits as they danced, posed, and played. 🎭



The children learn and sing a new song.



Charlie and Holly Bauer inspired and watched over the children



Pastor Paul Deming led the children in some wonderful songs (that he wrote!)



The children enjoyed the green grass, sunshine, and fresh breezes



Dress-up, music, and dancing proved irresistible.



Everyone had at least one turn at the music box.



The irresistible treasure trove of costumes, wigs, and hats

Business Sessions at the Annual Convention

BY KAREN CONGER AND HERB ZIEGLER

Constitution Amendments and Bylaws Amendments

President Jane Siebert called the business session to order on July 2 and had the rules read by Secretary Karen Conger.

The denomination's vice-president, Tom Neuenfeldt, presented an overview of the history of the Support Unit structure and the process that has led to the proposed amendments to the governing documents, which allow for moving from support units to a committee structure in an effort to increase the efficiency and transparency of our governance structure.

It was moved that the proposed constitutional changes, published in the March 2018 *Messenger*, which include Article II. Sections 1, 3, 4, and 5; and Article III. Sections 2 and 5 be approved.

Tom proceeded to explain the background of the amendments. The Structure Review Committee was formed several years ago, all constituent churches and bodies were consulted, a survey was sent out, a presentation and small group discussions for input took place at the 2017 Annual Convention, chairs of Support Units were consulted, and the proposed amendments were published in the March 2018 *Messenger*.

Tom explained the efficacy of the treasurer having a three-year, instead of a one-year, term; the efficacy of the chair of the Council of Ministers (COM) having a vote on the General Council; the change of the words "Support Unit" to "Committee;" the removal of "Cabinet" as a body, that body having not met regularly for several years and being replaced with the committee structure; and other language having to do with changes from

support units to committees. Discussion and vote were postponed until the next day.

It was also moved that the proposed Bylaws changes, published in the March 2018 *Messenger*, which include Article III; Article VI, Sections 1, 2, and 3; Article IX; Article X, Sections 1, 2, 3, and 4; Article XVII; and Article XVIII be approved.

Tom explained a bit of the background on the Bylaws amendments, including a description of changes in number of members on committees and the reduction in the number of committees as opposed to Support Units. Discussion and vote were postponed until the next day.

The amendments proposed to the Constitution and Bylaws were opened for discussion on July 3. Pete Toot had gone over the proposed changes and edited them for "scrivener's errors," without changing the intent. Following discussion, the motions passed with one yay each.

Credentials Report

Barb Halle reported the following figures from the Credentials Committee report: (first number is delegates allowed; second number is delegates attending):

Eastern Canada Conference: 9, 0
Illinois Association: 7, 6
Kansas Association: 9, 2
Maine Association: 16, 1
Massachusetts Association: 9, 3
Michigan Association: 8, 5
Middle Atlantic Association: 11, 1
New York Association: 5, 0
Ohio Association: 7, 7
Pacific Coast Association: 24, 20
Southeast Association: 4, 2
Western Canada Conference: 10, 4
Members At Large: 2, 0
SCYL: 2, 0
General Council: 11, 9

Ministers: 89, 22

Total delegates attending: 82

The Garden Church

Rev. Dr. Jonathan Mitchell and Rev. Dr. Amanda Riley, from the Garden Church at San Pedro, California, reported on events at that church, expressing their gratitude to all those who have supported the Garden Church with contributions, including donations from the Wayfarers Chapel and funding from the denomination. Founding minister Rev. Anna Woofenden moved to Saratoga, New York, last fall, and Jonathan now spearheads leadership. The ministry continues to be financially stable, with attendance steadily, slowly increasing. Connie related that the uniqueness of the experience at the Garden Church in its "imperfectness" is less scary than it would be in a regular sort of building, and that, therefore, "by the time you enter the garden and discover it's a church, you're not scared anymore."



Rev. Dr. Amanda Riley, the Garden Church

Swedenborg Online Community

Rev. Dr. Wilma Wake is set to retire after ten years as Swedenborg Online Community (SOC) minister. Wilma was unable to be present to receive the gift of a hand-crafted necklace, a small token of the esteem and affection in which Wilma is held by the denomination. SOC Board member Elbert Smith spoke enthusiastically and animatedly about happenings at SOC and welcomed Rev. Cory Bradford-Watts as its new part-time minister. (Rev. Bradford-Watts will also serve

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Business Sessions

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the Kitchener Church of the Good Shepherd in Ontario.)

Treasurer's Report¹

Jennifer Lindsay, treasurer, delivered the treasurer's report. The Common Fund's assets have grown consistently, resulting in a complete recovery from the recession of ten years ago. The Estate of Esther Knierim, sister of Elizabeth (Cindy) Gutfeldt, widow of Rev. Horand Gutfeldt, donated \$100,000 each to the denomination, the Center for Swedenborgian Studies, the Hillside Church in El Cerrito, California, and the Swedenborg Foundation.

Council of Ministers Report

Secretary of the Council Of Ministers (COM), Rev. Jenn Tafel, reported the presentation of visions of ministry from Rosalyn Taylor, Dr. Devin Zuber and Rev. Dan Burchett, as well as plans of ministry from Rachel Madjerac and Cory Bradford-Watts. She put forth motions from COM that Rachel Madjerac and Cory Bradford-Watts be ordained into the Swedenborgian ministry at this convention. She moved that Gordon Meyer be given licensed pastor standing, serving at the Virginia Street Church in St. Paul, Minnesota. The delegates voted unanimous approval of the candidacy of Rachel Madjerac and Cory Bradford-Watts and unanimous approval of Gordon Meyer as licensed pastor at Virginia Street Church. President Rev. Jane Siebert administered the oath of ministry to Rachel and Cory.

Denomination Website

Val Brugler introduced the new

denomination website, produced by the Digital Presence Group, to the convention (www.swedenborg.org). A dazzling video presentation about the new website, created and produced by Rev. Kevin Baxter, was well received. President Jane Siebert thanked the chair of the group, Chris Laitner for her work leading the Digital Presence Group over the past two years. She asked members of the group present to come forward for an appreciation. Val Brugler did much of the work of the group, integrating content into



Val Brugler and Rev. Jane Siebert

the website and contributing graphic design work. Jane Siebert presented her with a gift in appreciation for her contributions.

Statement on Biased and Discriminatory Interpretation

Terrie Crenshaw and Rebecca Esterson introduced a motion to affirm a draft statement on inclusivity in the interpretation of Swedenborg's writings ([page 114](#)). The motion passed.



Rev. Dick Tafel and Rev. Jane Siebert



Rev. Jane Siebert and Rev. Paul Martin

Recognitions

President Jane Siebert asked those who had completed a term of service to the denomination and were present to come up and receive a certificate of appreciation: Pastor Karen Feil (Education Support Unit), Rev. Dick Tafel (General Council), Rev. Paul Martin (Financial and Physical Resources Support Unit), Linda Tafel (Nominating Committee), Herb Ziegler (Investment Committee), and Rev. Jonathan Mitchell (Committee on Admission to the Ministry).



Linda Tafel and Rev. Jane Siebert

Gifts

President Siebert asked representatives of organizations giving major gifts to the Swedenborgian Church to come forward. Rev. Dave Brown and Rev. Dan Burchett presented Rev.



Wayfarers Chapel's Rev. Dan Burchett and Rev. Dave Brown and Rev. Jane Siebert

¹ Complete reports from the treasurer and other officers, and all reports submitted for the Annual Convention will be available in the 2018 Journal of the Swedenborgian Church when available. Contact Central Office for a copy: manager@swedenborg.org.

Convention Recap

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meant by Los Angeles!" At which point he displayed part of the next verse,

*L. A. is a great big freeway
Put a hundred down and buy a car
In a week, maybe two, they'll make you a
star
Weeks turn into years. How quick they pass*

. . . pointing out that acquiring a new car is love of the world and becoming a star is love of self. And then he displayed the last part of the verse,

*And all the stars that never were
Are parking cars and pumping gas*

. . . proposing that this is how one may end up from loving the world and self, as Swedenborg says, seeking dominion over all, including heaven and the Lord.

*You can really breathe in San Jose
They've got a lot of space. There'll be a place
where I can stay
I was born and raised in San Jose
I'm going back to find some peace of mind
in San Jose*

As to breathing, paraphrasing Swedenborg Curtis said, "People who are engaged in heavenly love breathe more freely and feel more alive the deeper into heaven they come."

As to "a place that I can stay," He reminded us that we are at home in a specific place in heaven, the essence of *Divine Providence* §67.

Born and raised? Well, yes, on earth, but in heaven at the same time, and as infants surrounded by angels.

*Fame and fortune is a magnet
It can pull you far away from home
With a dream in your heart you're never
alone
Dreams turn into dust and blow away
And there you are without a friend
You pack your car and ride away*

Fame and fortune, Curtis reminded us, are the very essence of love of self and love of the world. Getting

more specific to Swedenborg, he reminded us that *dust* signifies "what is condemned."

To much appreciative laughter, Curtis summarized that everything in Swedenborg is about "escaping Los Angeles and going home to San Jose." Of course, Los Angeles is not literally hell, and San Jose is not literally heaven—they both have their good and



The convention band L to R: Karen Conger and Ardith Francis, vocals; Paul Deming, guitar and vocals; Dan Berchett, keyboard; and Dave Fekete, bass

bad points—but in 1968, San Jose was, compared to LA, simple, humble, and accessible, the way Swedenborg describes heaven, and thus this comparison serves as a perfect metaphor.

Curtis expanded his comments to "being of use," loving the neighbor and tending to our daily lives while eschewing FOMO, or fear of missing out (apparently a prominent anxiety producer among young people today).

Concluding his thesis, Curtis quoted *Arcana Coelstia* §2654.

. . . in heaven the greatest are they who are least, the wisest they who believe and perceive themselves to be the least wise, and the happiest they who desire others to be the most happy, and themselves the least so; that it is heaven to wish to be below all, but hell to wish to be above all; consequently that in the glory of heaven there is absolutely nothing the same as in the glory of the world.

He emphasized that hierarchy, dominance, feelings of inadequacy, not fitting in, or missing out are not part of who we really are. If we are stuck in our own "Los Angeles," we can go home to "San Jose" by following Swedenborg's roadmap to letting the Divine flow

through us.

Following the keynote address, everyone enjoyed refreshments, provided by the Swedenborg Foundation, as they mingled. The first of nightly vespers were offered as the last program of the day.

Day 2: Monday, July 2

Rev. Junchol Lee led the memorial/communion worship service prior to the first business session.

Business sessions were interspersed with other activities on Monday and Tuesday ([page 94](#)). The Children's Ministry held its

annual meeting in late morning ([page 103](#)), and following lunch, the first and second sessions of mini-courses were held ([page 102](#)). After a quick lunch and before dinner, the Convention Choir, under the direction of Rev. Dan Burchett, met for rehearsal. After dinner, the Center for Swedenborgian Studies held its annual meeting and graduation ceremony ([page 108](#)).

Day 3: Tuesday, July 3

Rev. Thom Mueller led the morning worship, which featured the children in attendance. They were led by Rev. Paul Deming in singing some worship songs he wrote, and they displayed and explained the survival kits they had been making under the guidance and care of Charlie and Holly Bauer.

There were three business sessions, a mini-course session and, in the late



Rev. Thom Muller

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Convention Recap

Continued from page 96

afternoon, the Swedenborgian Youth League (SCYL) worship service ([page 100](#)).

After dinner, delegates and friends proceeded to a nearby Methodist church where the ordination of Rachel Madjerac and Cory Bradford-Watts transpired ([pages 88 & 89](#)). A reception, sponsored by Michael Shone & Group/Marquette Associates/Pierce, celebrated the new Swedenborgian ministers.

Day 4: Tuesday, July 4

The final mini-course session took place following breakfast. In the late morning, the closing worship service, led by convention preacher, Rev. Kit Billings, was a well received closing of our worship and all indoor activities ([page 110](#)). Everyone boarded buses after lunch and headed for Henry Cowell State Redwoods Forest, near Santa Cruz, one of the few remaining virgin stands of Coastal Redwoods.



Dwarfed by a Coastal Redwood

Arriving at the park, adults, teens, and kids wandered through the giant redwoods in groups, necks craned, awestruck by the size, height, and majesty of the trees. Re-assembling at the station, we boarded the steam train for a ride up the mountain. It was a fascinating and memorable ride through the redwoods.³

Returning to campus, we enjoyed a picnic on the patio, where the children (the fast eaters) joined Olivier Suzor, a delightful entertainer with a music box

³ The outing was sponsored by the Pacific Coast Association, Wayfarers Chapel, and Wilmington Trust.

Business Sessions

Continued from page 95

Siebert with a check from Wayfarers Chapel for \$5000. Barb Halle, representing the Laporte New Church, gave their annual "give-back check" of \$1510 to Rev. Siebert. The gift is composed of members' quarterly donations and one percent of the church's previous-year revenues, and acknowledges their deep gratitude for assistance they have received in the past.

A collection at this convention for support of teen travel to the annual convention next year totaled \$1566.

President Siebert thanked those who gave Financial assistance for this annual convention: Massachusetts New Church Union, New York Association, Pretty Prairie New Jerusalem Church, Ohio Association, Pacific Coast Association, Royal Oak Church of the Holy City (Michigan), San Francisco Society of the New Jerusalem, Virginia Street Church (St. Paul), Washington DC Church of the Holy City, Center for Swedenborgian Studies, Marquette Associates/Michael Shone, Swedenborg Foundation, Wilmington Trust/M&T Bank, Women's Alliance,

Karen and Stan Conger, Nancy and Nick Leras, Barb Halle, Jennifer Lindsay, Ralph and Virginia Kearns, and Jane Siebert.

Appreciations

Rev. Siebert recognized groups and individuals present for their help and service for this convention.

- The Convention Planning Committee: Nancy Leras, Bette McDonnell, Birrell Walsh, Herb Ziegler, Rebecca Esterson, Kurt Fekete, Devin Zuber, Jim Lawrence, Junchol Lee, Thom Muller, Karen Feil, Francesca McCrossan, and Karen Conger



Convention Planning Committee members present (L to R): Francesca McCrossan, Karen Conger, Nancy Leras, Herb Ziegler, Jane Siebert, Samantha Johanson

- Samantha Johanson, operations manager of the Swedenborgian Church, and Francesca McCrossan, administrative assistant at CSS, for their tireless work and support
- Volunteers from the San Francisco Church and the Hillside Community Church in El Cerrito, who took on the critical task of staffing

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and trunk full of costumes, to dance and play. After dark, the evening concluded with fireworks in the distance.

July 5th was departure day, and the



July 4th picnic, L to R: Amy Little, Carol and Bud Phillips

site of the convention grew eerily quiet by 11 AM. ☪



The Neuenfeldt clan and Jane Siebert leaving for Los Angeles and Wayfarers Chapel.





SCYL at Convention 2018

BY KURT FEKETE

Teens from the Midwest and as far away as Maine, New Jersey, and Alberta, found their way to San Jose to join up with teens on the Pacific Coast to attend the annual convention this year. This wonderfully large group of sixteen teenagers spent four days working, playing, worshipping, and learning together in the beautiful, sunny Silicon Valley of California.

The teens spent the first two days of the convention, in addition to worship and meetings, creating the SCYL worship service. As usual, the teens wanted to engage their creativity and develop a worship service this year involving a good deal of theatrics, which can be very challenging in the limited time that they have to prepare. But they really came together as a team and worked tirelessly to create something special.



Break time: shoes and shadows



12 of the 16 SCYL teens at the annual convention



The SCYL worship service

At each convention, as we meet and talk, the teens find their special places where they can be most useful. Some teens work behind the scenes writing plot and developing worship service content, some build props and construct sets, some work on audio-visual and other tech support needs, while still others, especially those who enjoy being on stage, rehearse lines and practice dialogue. Somehow, in thirty-six hours, it all comes together to

form a coherent worship experience.

This year the SCYL worship service involved a main character who goes through a traumatic, life-changing event that causes him to consider his life path and the choices he has made. He meets friends in the hospital who share information about different religions, along with SCYL "radio broadcasts" that support the various faiths. He struggles with making better choices and, in the end, he dies in transition feeling the pull from both good and evil sides.

On the day following the teen worship service, the teens were free to join with the rest

of Convention on an incredible outing to Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park and Roaring Camp Railroads,

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SCYL teens gather in the redwoods

SCYL at the Convention

Continued from page 100



Clear Blue Sky editor, Ava, pauses for a photo with the steam engine.

where they frolicked among the towering old-growth redwoods and rode an open car behind an 1880s steam locomotive through the towering, enormous Coastal Redwoods.



"Where's this train headed?"

We returned to San Jose State University for a barbeque featuring Oliver Suzor, an engaging entertainer who captivated the kids with costumes and music, and ended the day watching Fourth of July fireworks.



Gillian, Justice, and Ivy

The teens thoroughly enjoyed their convention experience in San Jose and are already talking about how to make Annual Convention 2019 in Indiana just as memorable. ☪

Youth Ministry and SCYL

Swedenborgian church youth director, Kurt Fekete, addressed the convention, recapping the year of activities with SCYL (Swedenborgian Church Youth League), SPLATz (Super-Powered Loveable Almost Teens), and other work he does with local church and youth programs.

Kurt invited adults to connect with the teens. Their social connectedness and group identification might make them appear uninterested in talking with adults, but they are.

He was pleased to report that sixteen SCYL teens were attending the convention from near and far away.

Next July, SCYL is planning a retreat with General Conference (British) teens in England, at their Purley Chase Conference Center. This will be the second time SCYL has done this, and the teens are looking forward to a great experience. Kurt said that SCYL needs more resources to support teens getting there, and he will be fundraising—stay tuned. He thanked everyone for their generous support of the teens in the past.

Scout Steinhiser, SCYL president, invited the teens to come forward and introduce themselves.

She reviewed the year briefly, but the May retreat, "Friendship and the Bible," stood out for her.

Scout noted that this was her eighth convention, six as a teen and two as a young child. She recalled as an interesting experience spending her second convention,

talking to adults and teens, strangers mostly, as there was no children's program that year. But her six years of experiences with SCYL have been most memorable and rewarding. They have been fun, friendships have grown, and she has learned a lot.

She continued: "SCYL has been a growth experience for all the teens. It encourages them to step out of comfort zones—some are afraid of the stage, then rock the show.

"The style of SCYL-created and conducted worship services changes over time to conform to our strengths. For a few years, SCYL services revolved around music, because many of us were talented musicians. But now, we have a lot of members involved in theater arts, and so our services are more theatrical.

"None of this is possible without you, members and friends of the Swedenborgian Church, and we are grateful for your continued support.

"It is wonderful to attend retreats and annual conventions, seeing old friends and making new ones. Returning home from these SCYL events, we see the world with a different set of eyes—we have a new outlook on how the world works. SCYL is a home we never have to leave.

I would like to thank parents who allowed us to come to these events, drivers who get us there, and ministers who come to teach. I especially want to thank Rev. Jenn Tafel, who is always checking in and posting on Facebook—always there to talk and listen, and, of course, Kurt, who organizes everything,

researching and developing themes, activities, and content. We love these two." ☪



Youth director, Kurt Fekete



SCYL president, Scout Steinhiser

Mini-Courses at the Annual Convention

Mini-courses are an eagerly anticipated feature of annual conventions, and this year's offerings were no exception. In fact, there were so many inviting choices, that most people were hard-pressed to decide. Here are the courses that provided stimulating presentations and lots of discussion that followed.

In **Swedenborg and New Discoveries in Cosmology**, Rev. Dr. Rachel Rivers examined a few of discoveries of the last 100 years that have radically altered our understanding of the physical universe and what spiritual truths they may illuminate. Swedenborg wrote that everything in the physical world portrays aspects of our inner, spiritual reality.



Robert McCluskey presenting "Proprium: the Search for Spiritual Identity"

Rev. Robert McCluskey explored Swedenborg's sometimes difficult concept of *proprium* in **Proprium: the Search for Spiritual Identity**. This concept is central to Swedenborg's theology, and yet most of us struggle to have a clear idea of how it applies to us.

In **Exploring Swedenborg's Life and Times in Sweden**, Dr. Devin Zuber and Colin Amato recounted the history of Swedenborg in Sweden, drawing on their experiences in the CSS January immersion course in Sweden.

Spirituality, Sustainability, and Food Justice: Lessons from the Garden Church was led by Rev. Jonathan Mitchell. The Garden Church in San Pedro, California, is based on the



Rachel Rivers presenting "Swedenborg and New Discoveries in Cosmology"

premise that we can create community and enhance spiritual lives by coming together to grow chemical-free food, sharing meals, and worshiping together.



Jonathan Mitchell presenting "Spirituality, Sustainability, and Food Justice: Lessons from the Garden Church"

er. Unhoused neighbors are included in activities as the community explores work on issues of food justice and environmental sustainability.

The Old and New Jerusalem was presented by Rev. Dr. Rebecca Esterson, assistant professor at CSS. We call our denomination, officially, the General Convention of the New Jerusalem, because the symbolism of the New Jerusalem is central to Emanuel Swedenborg's theology and doctrines. Rebecca put Jerusalem, old and new, in biblical and correspondential context, and explored the political and

religious realities of Jerusalem today.

Rev. Thom Muller, pastor of the Hillside Church in El Cerrito, California, presented **What's the Use of the Swedenborgian Church?**, exploring the potential of the Church in today's

spiritual landscape.

Curtis Childs (see page 85) spoke on **Swedenborg as Spiritual Duct Tape: a Look into the Diverse and Po-**

tent Ways Swedenborg's Ideas Affect People Online. He presented responses to the online work he has done and assessed the impact that work has had.

Dr. Grace Ji-Sun Kim presented **Planetary Solidarity**, an introduction to her book of the same name and a discussion of her ideas. The problem of climate change challenges us as Christians to engage in saving and preserving creation.



Participants in Wendy Sorenson's "Five Stages of Creativity and Five Stages of Regeneration: A Comparison"

Wendy Somerson led a hands-on workshop called **Five Stages of Creativity and Five Stages of Regeneration: A Comparison**. Making the

Continues on page 103

Annual Meeting of the Children's Ministry

The 145th Annual Meeting of the Swedenborgian Church Children's Ministry (SCCM) was led by its vice-president, Rev. Kit Billings. (The president, Rev. Alison Lane-Olsen, could not be present.) Kit read Alison's report, which contained the following information, to the meeting.

Fourteen congregations responded to the youth ministry survey:

disappointingly few churches have regular Sunday school or regular children's programs but many provide some kind of instruction for children, such as a children's message in the worship service.

SCCM had planned to send a representative to a Sunday school or children's ministry conference, but most conferences have proved to be too far to travel or too evangelical in nature.

A direction that SCCM has not taken before is working with the mystical side of our tradition. Swedenborg knew the importance of meditation and being in touch with one's inner being.

SCCM would like to offer our children the opportunity to explore the inner path of knowing. Investigations into research show the efficacy of practices such as yoga, meditation, and mindfulness for children increase attention, self-awareness, self-management skills, and pro-social behavior.

Mini-Courses

Continued from page 102

argument that the creative process mirrors transformation in regeneration, Wendy invited artists and non-artists to explore the continual manifestation of creation that creative problem solv-

connection to Swedenborg's writings as indispensable, along with the Bible, the *Hermetica*, and Plato's works.

Rev. Dr. David Fekete presented **Blake and Swedenborg**, introducing and discussing the changing ways Blake's work was influenced by Swedenborg's writings.



Dave Fekete discussing "Blake and Swedenborg"

ers have learned to use.

Jeffrey Adams presented **Maurice Nicoll's Clever Use of Swedenborg**. His research explores the degree of influence Swedenborg's writings had on the Fourth Way teacher, Dr. Maurice Nicoll. Nicoll embraced Gurdjieff's Fourth Way, but maintained his

Rev. Dr. Jim Lawrence presented snapshots of the latest research on **Best Practices in Our Churches and Ministries**. A discussion followed, looking at the special challenges of small-church ministry and how to distinguish between good risks and bad risks when trying new approaches. ☸



Jim Lawrence presenting "Best Practices in Our Churches and Ministries"



SCCM treasurer, Debbie Dolley

SCCM plans to fund two members to take an online course this fall that trains people in the skills and knowledge needed to teach these practices to children. The course provides information and exercises and includes personal feedback and coaching.

There are now many websites that provide Sunday school material and other useful youth ministry information. Rather than focussing energy and resources on creating materials for use in Sunday school, SCCM can direct members to these websites and use its resources for teacher training and other supportive activities.

The last item of business was elections. Elected were: president, Rev. Kit Billings; vice-president, Rev. Kevin Baxter; secretary, Rev. Carla Friederich; and treasurer, Debbie Dolley. ☸

General Council Convention Meetings

Pre-Convention Meeting

General Council (GC) met on July 1 for its pre-convention meeting. Time was taken to check-in, review and approve minutes, and receive reports.

Karen Conger presented the plan of the CSS Board to reduce its size from twelve to eight trustees to make it more manageable and for budgetary relief. A motion to support the combined actions of the Center for Swedenborgian Studies' proposal to amend its bylaws on board size with the combined actions of the board's conditional resignation of the trustees, followed by the adoption of the proposed ballot, passed.

It was agreed to revise policy for distribution of free hard copies of the *Journal of the Swedenborgian Church*. Only members of GC, the editor of the *Messenger* and the dean of CSS will be offered a free copy of the *Journal*; all others will be charged. Complete financial statements will no longer be printed in online versions of the *Journal* to prevent theft of the denomination's assets. The statements will be included in the print version and will be available separately by request from Central Office.

The Status of the Angel Windows

President Siebert reported that she and Karen and Stan Congers will be traveling in August to West Chester, Pennsylvania, to meet with members of Temenos Retreat Center to discuss the future of the Tiffany Angel Windows. The Windows are owned by Temenos and are part of the heritage of the Swedenborgian Church; it is the hope and dream of the Church that they may someday be on permanent

display in a venue offering maximum exposure, and that Temenos may obtain the funds they need to restore their infrastructure while honoring the large debt due to Convention.



2017-18 General Council L to R: (top row) Tom Neuenfeldt (vp), Rev. Dick Tafel, Lon Elmer, Carl Helm, Rev. Jane Siebert (president), Jennifer Lindsay (treasurer), (bottom row) Stan Conger, Karen Conger (secretary), Barb Halle, Rev. Betsy Coffman, Debbie Dolley, Rev. Dr. Gard Perry (chair of COM); not present: Rev. Junchol Lee, Rob Lawson

Nominating Committee

Nominating Committee chair, Linda Tafel, reported that it was noted recently that neither our Bylaws nor our Constitution require that there be two nominees for the Nominating Committee, as has been our practice, although *Roberts Rules of Order* allows for the continuance of "long-standing practice." Rev. Dr. George Dole of the Committee on Amendments suggested that it might be prudent to continue such a long-standing practice. This year we are having difficulty finding a second nominee.

Financials Information

Jennifer Lindsay distributed the latest copy of the audited financial statements. The final copies will be available within the next few weeks. A look at total assets reveals an increase primarily driven by the sale of the San Diego property in 2017. We have been able to meet all the restrictions in the disbursement of restricted funds, fully utilizing them, not having to deplete unrestricted funds—a wonderful positive.

We have only a \$2K deficit, which is most unusual in our recent history. In 2018, the denomination received a gift of \$100K from the Estate of Esther Knierim. This generosity may be attributable at least in part to the ongoing relationship of Jim Lawrence to Esther Knierim, who was the sister of Elizabeth (Cindy) Gutfeldt. Fifteen thousand dollars were donated by individuals to General Convention this year.

Jennifer is creating a financial history of previous annual conventions in order to develop a budget process for the conventions, the costs of which fluctuate.

Merrill Lynch has suggested we use ladder bonds to earn the denomination more interest while maintaining our desired liquidity. GC voted to engage Merrill Lynch to manage the denomination's Bank of America funds.

COM Meeting Report

The COM chair, Gard Perry, shared his gratitude at the way the meetings went this year and his overall encouragement in the process. He is encouraging the use of the phrase Peer "Support" in place of "Supervision."

COM distributed a survey in 2017 addressing practices, procedures, and requirements of our ministries for membership. The results indicate that a significant number of ministries have a set procedure for confirmation, though there are also centers without such a process, but which are open to guidance.

In response, the COM Executive Committee designed a one-day program on membership based on General Convention's Statement of Purpose;

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The President's Address

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church on Sunday, your boss would ask about it on Monday. Yes, the religious times, they are continuing to change also. And in many ways, this has been a needed change, but where does it leave us?

We must ask, have our churches changed to keep up with the change in our culture, our society? Do we still expect people to come in our doors because it is the right thing in our eyes for them to do? Are we too comfortable with our current little groups that we think of as welcoming to us, but may

not be to the newcomer?

Yes, we are living in what has been termed a post-Christian culture, where many consider church an optional, irrelevant, out-of-touch remnant of the past. If you attend church, you really have to want to—there are so many excuses not to. And yet people are lonely. They are seeking community; it is a consequential time to reach out to those that don't want to be alone. And so, we ask, "What is the way? The way ahead? How do people find their way into our churches?"

I just read a book called *Canoeing up the Mountains*, written by Tod Bolsinger, professor of practical theology at Fuller Seminary. He equates the times we are in as church leaders to the expedition led by Lewis and Clark. They were commissioned by Thomas Jefferson to find a water route from St. Louis to the Pacific Ocean.

When they got to the Rocky Mountains, they were excited to find the source of the Missouri River that they had been traveling on upstream in their canoes for fifteen months. They looked over the first peak and instead of finding the source of another river flowing on the other side of the Continental Divide to take them to the sea, as they and everyone else thought, they just found more and more mountains. They had to ditch their canoes and ask the Shoshone Native Americans for horses to keep going, then make new canoes out of burnt trees when they finally did find a river.

They expected the unexplored geography of the West to be just like the familiar East. Too often we expect the church of our past to serve us into the future. Lewis and Clark expected their canoes (which we can think of as doctrine, or knowledge of what is

good and true) to continue to get them where they needed to go. They had to change to horses (or meditation from the Word as a person thinks spiritually) to get over the mountains (which represent the highest celestial and spiritual love in a good sense, and in a negative sense the mountains that

can be self-love and love of the world). This obstacle caused them to have to change from a knowledge of what is right to a love for what is right to get past their self-love and love of the world. They had to ask for help from those who lived in the mountains. And then, when they overcame their pride and self-love, they had to build new canoes (corresponding to new understanding and practical use of doctrine).

As Christians, as Swedenborgians, we are at the mountains and we cannot expect the old ways, our canoes that have carried us this far, to get us over the mountains. We cannot stop and say these mountains are too high—they go on too far for us—I'm just going to build a little cabin here and bide my time. Inviting as this may seem, we will just get buried in snow and cut off from the rest of the world.

I believe this is an opportune time for our tradition. I believe, and many of you believe this too, we have what many are searching for. We have a theology that resonates with the times and spiritual seekers. In the sixties, only four percent of the US population did not claim a church affiliation; now that number is closer to thirty percent. We know the phrase—spiritual but not religious. People are still looking for spirituality and feel the need for a spiritual community. Our hurdle to is show them we are spiritual and offer an open spiritual path where are all welcome

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a member is an individual who aligns with that purpose. The Executive Committee of COM plans to develop a proposed framework to offer to GC this fall, and to the COM next spring, describing what a confirmation service looks like within that framework, which may vary slightly across the spectrum of our ministries.

Deland Church/Southeast Association

Rev. Dick and Linda Tafel visited the Deland (Florida) Church, the Chrysalis Fellowship, in June to evaluate its status. They found reasons for both encouragement and concern. Carolyn Salyer is the de facto (and very valuable) leader at this point. Rev. Skuli Thorhallsson's, health no longer allows him to be involved in the life of the church; he has signaled his readiness to retire. Carolyn has reroofed portions of the structure, painted much of it, and accomplished many other tasks, using her own money and time. The Deland board structure and membership status need attention, and

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The President's Address

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and can remain uniquely themselves. Variety builds our communities.

To prepare my president's report I decided to talk with a few new members who have come through our doors in the last couple of years. I sent out an email to seven ministers asking for names of people I might contact. I phoned new members from Maine to California, from Minnesota to New Mexico, from Massachusetts to Detroit. I used up all my minutes on my phone and had to purchase more. I learned positive things that I would like to share with you. It was a very upbeat experience for me.

So "How Do People Find Their Way Into our Churches?" And of course, the ways are as diverse as we who call ourselves Swedenborgians. But there were some commonalities I would like to share.

The first was the need for someone to invite them to church, maybe even stop by to pick them up. Often this was the minister or a friend who attends the church. We have to reach out, not proselytizing, but sharing and knowing we have something that others need.

One member that just joined last Easter in Royal Oak, Michigan, had to be invited several times by its minister Rev. Renée Machiniak, who she met at a social gathering. She said that the minister did not give up, that she was a patient in the hospital and the minister was her chaplain. When she got out of the hospital, she told her husband, "I am going to try that Church that meets in the Woman's Club house." Once she did, she found a deep peace and welcome that continues to hold her up through dealing with cancer. She told me, "Sometimes I don't feel like going anywhere but I still go to church. I don't know where I would be without this church."

One couple I spoke with in Minnesota was attracted by "Off the Left Eye," the Swedenborgian YouTube series, when they lived in Florida. When they retired from South Florida and moved to Minnesota (yes, they know they are doing it backwards), they were delighted to find a Swedenborgian church in St. Paul. They walked in one Sunday, and the congregants were surprised. "How did you find your way in our church?" The couple said they felt right at home; actually they said it was like coming home.

To prepare my president's report I decided to talk with a few new members that have come through our doors in the last couple years.

Many spoke of the welcoming spiritual community they found. "They invited us to coffee hour after church." "Members went out of their way to speak with me." "There was a spiritual bond that I could feel and wanted to be a part of." One young woman from Maine said she was so relieved to be in this space, sharing God and good energy, that she cried. She had been trying a variety of churches when she moved to the area and said she was desperate for a spiritual community that wasn't pretentious. "I no longer feel alone. The minister speaks from her heart."

One couple, in Cambridge, was drawn by the architecture, as both were architects. Now, this doesn't work for all our churches, but I know many with unique houses of worship do get several visitors thereby and are working to find how to get a new visitor to return. They tried the church; the theology resonated with them; in their membership classes, the minister introduced Swedenborg in a fascinating and approachable manner.

I asked the question about how to get first timers to return, and the

responses were informative. "Help new people feel relaxed." "Be real." "Send out a survey to visitors asking their help to know how to serve visitors better, asking why they came, what they liked and didn't like." Another person said it would have been helpful to have a new attendee orientation, especially with our deep theology.

Over and over people mentioned their appreciation for our theology, often with excuses that they hadn't read much directly from Swedenborg's writings, but everyone knew generally about Swedenborg's teachings, and most had attended classes. The acceptance of different paths was a drawing card. They used words like the following: sermons are real; there is a reverence for diversity; you can go deep or stay on surface; no one is told what to believe; this belief system expands beyond traditional Christianity; it presents a God of love that I can believe in; it has affirmed for me that God is still alive, the Bible has come alive; I like that Swedenborg was a mystic, way back then—he bucked the religious system of the time.

I asked about what kept them coming, and over and over it was the community they found there, using words like the following: open minded, caring, not cliquey, relaxed, peaceful, not traditional, variety, dedicated, community oriented, not dogmatic, helping others, intimacy of small community, unconditional availability, acceptance, non-judgmental, I leave feeling spiritually nourished.

Another common topic was the small size of the church. It felt comfortable and welcoming and it was easy to get to know everyone's name. It is a place to heal from damage done in other church settings.

There were various religious backgrounds. Members came from Catholic, Lutheran, Episcopalian, Sufi, Unitarian Universalist, Buddhist,

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The President's Address

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Assemblies of God, and Presbyterian. One person I talked with for over two hours had been in a religious fundamentalist cult and swore she would never set foot in a church again, until she found a home in the New Church of the Southwest Desert in Silver City, New Mexico. Many shared their difficult times in traditional Christian churches and how they found a different Christianity in the Swedenborgian churches. "Here the members don't just talk about it on Sunday, they live it throughout the week." Some were still attending both their original faith tradition and the Swedenborgian home they had found. One person asked, "That's OK, isn't it?" and I assured them, "Of course. We offer a spiritual home where you can find community while remaining uniquely you!"

I asked what they especially liked in their churches: blessing of the bikes, meditation groups, book groups, sermons that touch my heart, ukulele group, creative recovery group, discussion after the sermon, the music, service to the community, reading group, the minister, prayer circle. It all comes together in different ways in our various churches out there. There is no one right way. As the author of *Canoing over the Mountains* stresses, at this point, we are facing the mountains in religious circles. We must get out of our canoes and round up what horses we are going to ride to traverse the mountains. We must continue to change, try new things, experiment.

Thomas Jefferson was sixty when he selected Merriweather Lewis for this dangerous and important mission to find the Northwest Passageway. Jefferson was the nation's Renaissance man with vision, courage, and bravery. He was ambivalent about the Christian faith, having experienced the questionable dogma of his era that turned

him away from traditional Christianity. We have records that he was a reader of Swedenborg, and when he was president, he invited John Hargrove, the minister of the Baltimore New Church, to preach twice before Congress on the doctrines of the New Jerusalem.

Those of us that fall into the bracket of "mature Christian leaders and members," the beyond sixty group, can learn from Jefferson's idea and his support of this brave expedition. Leaders can create and change culture or they can inhibit change by demanding things stay the same. Our responsibility is to inspire the next generation to go where we have not. We need to support new ideas, and some may be risky and questionable. We also need to know when it is time to let go of our old canoes and replace them with fresh horses, carrying new maps and new ideas and experiments.

We cannot just sit idly by however, for we have learned important lessons from our years of church leadership. Plans need to be solid. We must lend our experience while not blocking experimentation. We must create an environment where the conditions of transformation are possible. We must embolden young leaders with our prayers, support, and opportunities.

And we must support one another, as this is a hard time to be a Christian leader, and I am speaking to all of you as Christian leaders—it's not just the ministers and licensed pastors. We all feel the strain of the mountains we have come upon and the anxiety of not knowing what is ahead. Be kind to one another and be kind to yourself. It is okay not to know. Lift each other up with encouragement and thanksgiving for what we do have.

And to our young leaders, remember that maps change, plans need to be well thought out and subject to change. Leaders of the future must always be learners open to suggestions

and guidance, not experts, for then we can fall into the crevices of the mountains with our inexperience. We pledge to work together and seek to be the adventurers, leading the Church in this rapidly changing world.

And to all of us: I remember one night as I was leaving the hospital where I worked as chaplain, having this dreadful feeling that I cannot leave. There was a family still in the trauma bays from an accident that killed their mother; another patient I had been visiting for a week was actively dying; premature twins in NICU were hanging on to life. How could I leave? And I actually heard God's voice, telling me, "Jane, do you think when you leave, I leave?"

We are not alone in this. We have a God bringing architects through our doors because we have beautiful old buildings. We have a Holy Spirit directing us into hospital rooms where someone needs what we have to offer. We have a theology that is "Good News Fresh Out of Heaven," just as Johnny Appleseed shared, and a "Light in the Darkness" as Helen Keller attested to. The Divine touched the hearts of those I spoke with: Cheyenne, Caite, Alison, Mark, Cookie, Karen, Anna, Melissa, Paul, Stephanie, Debi, and Susan, to "find the way" into one of our churches. People are needing and searching for a message they can hang onto in difficult times. We must learn to relate the message in a fascinating and approachable manner.

The times they are "a-changin'," but the Holy One is not changing and is not sleeping or leaving us alone. May I open this convention, as we wonder how to find the way, leaving you with hope for the future, trust in our Lord and Savior, and appreciation for what we have to offer as we stand together for a better world. Amen.

—*With care and a look to the future,*
Rev. Jane Siebert

CSS Annual Meeting

BY KAREN CONGER & HERB ZIEGLER

A full report from the dean of CSS and the treasurer's report will appear in the 2018 Journal of the Swedenborgian Church. Contact Central Office for notification when it is available (manager@swedenborg.org).

The annual meeting of the New Church Theological School (the Center for Swedenborgian Studies [CSS]) was chaired by John Titus (sitting in for the chair of the Board of Trustees, Jenny Caughman) on the evening of July 2, 2018.



Rev. Anna Woofenden

Board member Rev. Anna Woofenden gave the invocation to begin the meeting.

The dean of CSS, Rev. Dr. James Lawrence spoke briefly. He noted that with

the ordination of Rachel Madjerac and Cory Bradford-Watts and licensing of Gordon Meyer, CSS has launched forty-six people into various forms of ministry since its establishment in Berkeley in 2000 (as the Swedenborgian House of Studies at Pacific School of Religion). For the 2018–19 year, there are a Doctor of Ministry student, a Master of Religious Studies student, several ordination-track (Master of Divinity)



Dean Jim Lawrence

students and continuing studies by licensed pastors. He related how valuable to students the January immersion class trip to Sweden was and revealed that an immersion class to the Holy Land (that may include laity), led



Treasurer Jennifer Lindsay

a slight deficit in the current budget, which the Board is working to avoid in the future.

Terrie Crenshaw, board member and acting development chair, spoke about her connection to the Swedenborgian Church, the importance of CSS, and the important role of giving—large gifts and small—to the life of the school. She thanked those who have given in the past and those who plan on giving now and into the future. The Development Committee is working on a plan to help those willing to leave gifts with their estate planning.

Dean Lawrence conducted discussion and voting on board-proposed amendments to the Constitution and Bylaws of CSS (Published in the May 2018 *Messenger*).

The purpose of the changes is to improve the structure of the Board of Trustees to be more efficient and less costly. The size of both the denomination membership and the school's student body do not justify a board of fourteen people (twelve elected, six representative class and six at-large class, the dean and the president of General Convention serving ex-officio). The amendment reduces the elected members to eight, evenly split between classes.

The motion to amend passed. Four trustees either termed off or chose not to continue. The remaining eight

by Dr. Rebecca Esterson, is in the planning stages.

Treasurer Jennifer Lindsay reported on the financial health of the school, noting

trustees resigned, were nominated for the new four-year terms (staggered), and were elected.

Dean Lawrence recognized Rev. Dr. Robert Reber and Karen Conger for their many years of excellent service on the Board.



Secretary Karen Conger

Conferring of Certificates

Although Swedenborgian ministers, since 2000, matriculate and receive their M. Div. degrees from accredited theological schools, often at the Pacific School of Religion, to become Swedenborgian ministers, they must complete a course of studies in



Cory Bradford-Watts receiving his Certificate of Swedenborgian Studies (L: John Titus, R: Jim Lawrence)



Rachel Madjerac receiving her Certificate of Swedenborgian Studies

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CSS Annual Meeting

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Swedenborgian thought and practice. John Titus and Dean Jim Lawrence awarded the Certificate of Swedenborgian Studies to Cory Bradford-Watts and Rachel Madjerac, who would be ordained on the following evening, and the Certificate of Licensed Pastor to Gordon Meyer.

Panel Discussion

Replacing the usual graduation address by one of the trustees, a panel consisting of Rev. Dr. Jim Lawrence, dean of the Center for Swedenborgian Studies at the Graduate Theological Union (GTU), and faculty associate and director of the doctor of ministry program at the Pacific School of Religion; Dr. Rebecca Esterson, assistant professor of sacred texts and traditions and Dorothea Harvey professor of Swedenborgian studies; and Dr. Devin Zuber, associate professor of American studies, religion, and literature responded to queries from Curtis Childs, digital content producer for



L to R: Curtis Childs, Rebecca Esterson, Devin Zuber, Jim Lawrence

the Swedenborg Foundation. (view at <https://tinyurl.com/CSSPanel2018>) Subjects included a brief history of the school since moving from Massachusetts to Berkeley in 2000, accounts of growth, change and impact there, and the experience and importance of

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their insurance status is unknown. They own their property and have no dissolution clause, but they do have by-laws. Corinne Millar and her daughter, who were lately at Silver City, New Mexico, have moved nearby. The possibility of a mission trip to Deland was discussed, supported by a *Messenger* article to spark interest.

Post-Convention Meeting

Discussion of the Chrysalis Fellowship continued. Member Carolyn Salyer detailed some of the more recent history and the current status.

Mark Vivino, one of their members,

teaching and learning in a multi-religious academic milieu. The panelists explained how they fit in at GTU and the specific courses they teach. They emphasized the importance of students and their formation journeys as well as being in the midst of a challenging and exciting academic environment, help-

who has since moved to New York, personally discharged Deland's financial debt to the denomination.

John Springer's involvement is very helpful, though he is not a member.

Carolyn will send the church bylaws to Central Office. There is extensive disrepair in all of the buildings, which must be addressed. Betsy Coffman (liaison) and Carolyn will submit an article for *the Messenger*. Carolyn will take charge of organizing work parties for a mission trip should it come to fruition.

The following appointment confirmations were voted: Alan Thompson, Investment Committee; Rev. Rich Tafel, Retirement Committee; Rev. Betsy Coffman, Trustees of the Building Fund; Elbert Smith, Swedenborgian Online Community Central Committee; Millie Lakko to replace Sue Ditmire, and Linda Kraus to replace Connie Helm on the Standing Committee for Nominations.

Jennifer Lindsay reported the final tally of contributions at the annual convention was \$1566, directed to support teens' travel expenses to the retreat in England next year. And, collected at the closing worship, \$928 in donations for the denomination.

Executive Committee liaisons for standing committees and churches were assigned as follows:

- Jennifer Lindsay: Standing Committee for Financial Accountability
- Karen Conger: Standing Committee for Communication and Information
- Tom Neuenfeldt: Standing Committee for Education & Resources for Spiritual Growth

The Council discussed the proposition that ministries that apply to receive funding must have submitted a timely report to the *Journal*. Discussion will continue.

The fall meeting will be in Chicago on November 9–10, 2018. The Spring teleconference is scheduled for May 11, 2019.

Eating From the Tree of Life

San Jose Convention Sermon—Closing Worship Service

REV. KIT B. BILLINGS

Scripture Readings: Revelation 21:1–5, 10–14, 22–25, and 22:1–2

Insight for Worship: Revelation Revealed §933 by Emanuel Swedenborg

The Tree of Life in the Midst of the City [gender inclusive]

“And on this side of the river and on that was the Tree of Life, bearing twelve [manner of] fruits, yielding its fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. (Rev 22:2).”

“This signifies that in the inmost of the truths of doctrine and thence of life in the New Church is the Lord in His Divine Love, from whom flow all the goods that humanity does apparently as of ourselves. “In the midst” signifies in the inmost and thence in all things around; by “the street,” the truth of the doctrine of the church is signified; by a “river” is signified Divine Truth in abundance. By “the Tree of Life,” the Lord as to the Divine Love is signified; by “fruits” are signified the goods of love and charity, which are called good works; by “twelve,” all are signified, and it is predicated of the goods and truths of the church. “Revelation Revealed §933)”

I remember the first few times, as a young teenager, when I heard references to the Book of Revelation. I overheard some schoolmates of mine talking about a sermon they had heard in church over the weekend, and what I heard left me feeling chilled to the bone. They were talking about the “end times,” when Jesus would suddenly appear on the literal clouds in the sky after a huge trumpet blast, and then all sorts of horrifying calamities would unfold, such as the world being destroyed by fire before the righteous were taken up into heaven on some divine escalator while the evil and the unbelievers were left on Earth to suffer God’s wrath.

At that point, at the age of thirteen, I wasn’t sure whether or not I believed



in a benevolent Super Being who had allowed thousands of years of brutality, bigotry, and pain to happen throughout human history. I wasn’t exactly sure whether or not God truly existed. I was essentially like Doubting Thomas, who said not long after Christ’s crucifixion: “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.” (John 20:25) One thing I was sure about was that

I knew that there was something very precious and real in life, which made life worth living—but I couldn’t put my finger on it, just what that rare, hidden, magical gem of truth might be.

the kind of God my schoolmates were talking about would never be one I’d want to worship and follow. For them, it somehow made sense, but for me, believing in God in three persons and that salvation centers on faith alone, leaving love, good works, and compassion out of it, left me feeling uninspired inside. Then I decided to read Revelation for myself, a bit at a time,

and I discovered that on the literal level it comes across like *The Chronicles of Narnia* meets *Star Wars*! It’s loaded with fantastic imagery and plenty of serious battles. Yet even in its literal level we find some of the more poignant verses in all of Scripture. For example, we find Christ saying,

Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me. He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne. . . . (Rev. 3:20–22)

As I read these words over and over, I began to feel a sublime, warm, loving voice tugging at the inner recesses of my mind. I also read that the Lord’s angel said to the church at Laodicea:

I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. (Rev. 3:15-16)

I then had this image of God spitting out lukewarm Christians from His mouth like chewing tobacco.

Further on into Revelation I found this eye-opening quote:

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. (Rev. 20:12)

As a youth, I felt a deep impact by these words, because they expressed to me that the quality of my life truly matters, and that my eternal destiny doesn’t rest on something as flimsy as whether or not I stated that Christ died for my sins, but rather on *my choices in life*. By the age of fourteen and fifteen,

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Closing Worship Sermon

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my spiritually oriented questions about life really began growing inside of my heart and my mind. I knew that I was as mortal as anyone else and that one day, like my Grandpa Rollo Billings, I too would at some point step through death's doorway! I also was asking the question, "What is Love? And does it have much to do with the afterlife?"

As a boy I was enamored with *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*. I enjoyed the sweet make-believe as that darling little trolley would disappear inside its tunnel and emerge on the other side in a magical world where puppet kings spoke, as well as little Daniel the striped tiger and Mr. Owl, who often had wise things to say. But what always grabbed me the most was the deep warmth, goodness, and desire Mr. Rogers had to truly relate with others. His lovingkindness shined forth by how he connected with the special guests he had on his show. I also loved the way that Fred Rogers cared about wanting to help me and all of his viewers with our difficult feelings and struggles as children. He spoke about how important it is to be real about our hurts, our anger, and that even though tough times happen, there are people who care about each other, which helps us get through those tough times, and learn from them.

The warmth and goodness of Mr. Rogers left a lasting impression on me, and because both of my parents also valued being loving and useful in life, I knew that there was something very precious and real in life, which made life worth living—but I couldn't put my finger on it, just what that rare, hidden, magical gem of truth might be.

So, I began, at the age of fifteen, to start asking my parents and my Grandma Gwen Billings (who was living with my family for a couple of years) some

big questions. I remember having some long, in-depth conversations with each of them—and then, curiously enough, one day I heard my dad (Rev. John Billings) refer to the Book of Revelation as the "Charter Book" for our denomination. And I thought to myself, "What?! That strange, bizarre book? You're kidding?!"

I looked up the definition of the word *charter*, which is "a written document that defines the vision, mission, scope of operation, and the objectives of the group it relates to." And so, now my curiosity was deeply peaked! My parents then kindly shared their under-



standing of what makes our church so dynamically unique. They discussed how most of Scripture contains within it a deeper meaning contained within the literal level, which my dad called the *inner sense*. He shared with me the deeper meaning of the scrolls and the seven seals in Revelation, which were opened by the Lamb of God, our risen-glorified Lord Jesus Christ, during His cosmic Second Coming, which shines out into our understanding this amazing inner meaning, which speaks to

our personal journeys of life.

Over the next several weeks we slowly began to unpack the Book of Revelation in its inner meaning, and then it all began to make sense for me. . . . it was beautiful and glorious! What had been obscure was now shining, just like the New Jerusalem image itself at the end of the vision. In one sense I felt more and more humbled inside, because my dad taught me that when we look at the entire Bible story from start to finish, it's partially saying that the sometimes small and sometimes big and painful inner battles we all go through in life will likely last into our old age here on Earth. *Revelation*, as we know, is the last book in the Bible. The word *revelation* means revealing, uncovering, or disclosing to us. In its inner meaning it reveals that if we freely choose to cooperate and grow throughout life, taking seriously our own need for repentance and reformation, we then allow the Lord to regenerate us in His love.

And it is this *deep, personal, regenerating, mystical experience* of the Lord's great Divine-Human Love for all that is the living "Tree of Life." Eating its fruit is simply personally receiving God's Love within, and then using it toward what is good and true in our daily lives. This useful, charitable way of life feeds us the "sweet fruits" of spiritual pleasure and delight that flow in by way of good living. And so, in my own personal way, God became more and more real, where those words in Revelation 3:20–22 actually came alive—believing that Christ really is knocking on the doorway of my heart and mind and would love to come in and dine with me. Eventually I began to encounter the awesome truth of the gigantic battles and struggles in this strange vision that John had fifty or sixty years after Jesus rose from His grave on Easter morning.

I began reflecting about the key

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Closing Worship Sermon

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antagonists (or foes) within the Revelation story line, such as the “great red dragon,” that took a position facing the beautiful woman clothed with the Sun, ready to gobble up and devour her newborn baby boy. Such dragons can symbolize those desires within us to think that our knowledge alone of spiritual ideas, looking at Scripture and life in more shallow ways, is fine and dandy and that it’s not necessary for me to join warm compassion with genuine faith inside. Swedenborg states that this big seven-headed dragon represents anyone wanting to be saved by faith alone. In *Marriage Love* §28, Swedenborg shared that the great dragon can signify those who hear God’s Word and feel no remorse or problem with their evils and bad ways of treating others. Also, that such great, red dragons can *symbolize my false rationalizations in my mind that try to fight against the truths*

of the Lord’s New Church. It symbolizes more shallow forms of thinking when we busy ourselves to try to extinguish the doctrines of the Lord’s New Church, which have an amazing ability to develop many new, very innocent thoughts and perceptions inside, symbolized by that baby boy being born!

One of my dad’s greatest strengths is being able explain New Church ideas and theology in ways that make sense. And so, we talked a lot about how difficult and painful some of our spiritual battles are inside at times—but also, I learned that our theology teaches that when life feels things are at their worst,

when we feel like we’re about to crumble and give in to inner temptations, it’s at these times when the Lord is actually closest to us and fighting for us! And also, that just as we find over and over again throughout God’s Word that if we are willing to surrender ourselves into the Lord’s hands, battling “as if of ourselves,” (and try to open up

I can say for myself that one of my enduring spiritual challenges is that it’s easy for me to diminish how tremendously good God’s Kingdom truly is

and trust that the battle is actually being fought by the Lord and His angels, symbolized by the Archangel Michael fighting the beasts), then *the Divine One will always deliver us into victory.*



This was the time as a teenager, when I first began to grasp the meaning of the Lord’s message to us all, that “Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and (the Lord says) I will be their God and they will be my children.” Over and over again in Revelation I found that although the battles are massive and intense, still our inner foes are no match for God. I then came across another major force of opposition in the Revelation vision given to John, which was also a recurring enemy to the Israelites long ago: Babylon. Babylon, I learned, stands for all those desires within me that long to control

and dominate others, even God, if such passions are not recognized, judged for what they are and shunned, giving way to immense images of hope and promise after one chooses to confront and overcome Babylon with God’s help.

Ever since my amazing and very poignant teenage years, I have continued returning to the Book of Revelation. And more and more I’ve come to perceive that like any other part of God’s Holy Word, *it is a story for us and about us.* And with the awesome gift of the “scrolls of Scripture” opened up, revealing illuminating Light, I’ve come to perceive that Revelation is very much like a mirror reflecting what’s happening throughout my life in my spiritual development. As my mother shared with me recently in one of many phone calls we enjoy together, she said, “Every day is a spiritual battle for me. It’s a tussle

between my will and God’s will.” To which I shared with her, “It’s a struggle between my unregenerate *proprium* (or sense of self) and the new-angelic *proprium* trying

to grow up and stand up inside.”

Most interestingly, Revelation is a mirror revealing the Lord’s judgment upon the actual spiritual disorders within me, that is, the condition of the church inside of me. This is God at her best, not holding back about the weaknesses that get in the way of much deeper, more internal spiritual strengths coming alive—which is the New Jerusalem descending inside of my heart and mind and life, *today!* What means so much to me, now that I am at the midpoint of my life, is that

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Passages

Deaths

Margaret Jane Kraus died on July 8, 2018, at the Prairie Sunset Home, Pretty Prairie, Kansas, at the age of eighty-nine. She was dearly loved by many and will be sorely missed. She was born on May 26, 1929, at Springfield, Missouri, the daughter of Horace and Ethel Faulkner Abernathy.

A longtime resident of the Pretty Prairie community, she was a lifelong Kansas educator, first teaching art at Wakeeney, where she met her husband Lee, also a teacher. She also taught at Hutchinson's Sherman Junior High School, Fairfield High School, and Pretty Prairie, retiring from the Pretty Prairie High School. She was a championship girls' basketball and track and

field coach and coached tennis and golf. Teaching was her passion.

Margaret was a member of the New Jerusalem Church in Pretty Prairie and had served on the General Council of the Swedenborgian Church. She was formerly a board member of the Reno County Farm Bureau, women's chair of the Reno County Republican Party, a member of the Kansas delegation to the 2004 Republican National Convention, a member of the Hutchinson/Reno Arts & Humanities Council, chair of the Board of Supervisors of the Reno County Conservation District, and Chair of the Standing Committee on Stewardship for the Kansas Association of Conservation Districts, among other volunteer and community service. She loved to be busy and to serve others.

She graduated *magna cum laude*

with a B.A. in Art from Drury College, Springfield, Missouri, where she was a member of Kappa Delta Sorority, and later earned an M.A. in Art from Wichita State University. Margaret was a life-long learner.

On July 19, 1952, Margaret married Lee Kraus; he died at the young age of fifty-four on August 4, 1973.

Survivors include daughter, Nancy LaVerde, of Richardson, Texas; son, Lee Kraus of Greenwich, Connecticut; brother, Don Abernathy, of Springfield, Missouri; and two grandchildren she cherished, Katrina and Erika. She also was preceded in death by her sister, Mary Powell.

Memorial contributions may be made to the New Jerusalem Church, Pretty Prairie or to the ALS Mid-America Chapter in memory of her dear niece Paula Kraus Hilbert. ☩

Closing Worship Sermon

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Revelation shows me that it is “par for the course” for all of us “fighting the good fight” inside. And for all of us willing “to suffer ourselves through regeneration,” we’re going to be blown away by how glorious, beautiful, and deep God’s Kingdom is, which continues to descend gradually inside of us, revealed to us by the inner meaning of our charter book.

I can say for myself that one of my enduring spiritual challenges is that it’s easy for me to diminish how tremendously good God’s Kingdom truly is, which is being built day by day when I choose to shun evils as sins before God and live according to divine commandments. For when we choose to cooperate with the Lord and His great promise to build His New Church within us, the absolutely gorgeous Holy City pictured in this vision is what the Lord is making come alive inside! And when even a very small part of us starts to

believe in the promise of the New Jerusalem descending gradually within, when we value *God’s love becoming central* inside our hearts and minds, becoming vulnerable to God’s Love cherishing me and everyone else too, the Lamb of God starts to shine inside, giving its Light both day and night!

Then “the inmost of the truths of doctrine and thence of life in the New Church is the Lord in His Divine Love, from whom flow all the goods that humanity does apparently as of ourselves.” And so, the Lord in His saving love becomes personal, and as we live according to the ways of love-and-faith joined in charity, we are eating from the Tree of Life! For me, it’s sort of like the quality of Mr. Rogers coming alive in my life—and the simple yet immense value of every human being becomes more important to me than eating my favorite foods or being sure to have time playing my favorite video game. So, too, does wanting to serve the Lord’s New Church and her great mission, revealed by the

Holy City (the beautiful doctrines) of genuine Christianity, given to us in the literal and inner meaning of the Ten Commandments, as well as the joining of love, faith, and justice for all.

The promise of the Lord’s New Jerusalem descending cosmically for all feeds me with real, living, never-ending *hope inside*, because I know and feel that in spite of all of the terrible wrongs, abuse, neglect, and heartaches people suffer through life, still the Second Coming is happening. We all get to participate in God’s Kingdom coming alive *now . . . within and around us*. Perhaps Emily Dickenson said it best in her poem, “‘Hope’ Is the Thing with Feathers.”

“Hope” is the thing with feathers—
That perches in the soul—
And sings the tune without the words—
And never stops—at all.

Amen. ☩

Rev. Kit Billings is pastor of the LaPorte New Church in LaPorte, Indiana and a hospital chaplain.

About the Swedenborgian Church

Emanuel Swedenborg was born January 29, 1688, in Stockholm, Sweden. Although he never intended a church denomination to be founded or named after him, a society was formed in London fifteen years after his death. American groups eventually founded the General Convention of Swedenborgian Churches.

As a result of Swedenborg's spiritual questioning and insights, we as a church exist to encourage that same spirit of inquiry and personal growth, to respect differences in views, and to accept others who may have different traditions.

In his theological writings, Swedenborg shared a view of God as infinitely loving and at the very center of our beings, a view of life as a spiritual birthing as we participate in our own creation, and a view of scripture as a story of inner life stages as we learn and grow. Swedenborg said, "All religion relates to life, and the life of religion is to do good." He also felt that the sincerest form of worship is a useful life.

Draft Statement of the Swedenborgian Church on Interpreting Texts

Terrie Crenshaw and Dr. Rebecca Esterson made the following presentation.

Members of the faculty and Board of Trustees of the Center for Swedenborgian Studies have drafted a statement for a vote of affirmation by the clergy and body of the Swedenborgian Church at the 2018 Annual Convention. This action is intended to initiate a year of study and discussion, in hopes of bringing a standing resolution to the floor of Annual Convention 2019.

As Swedenborgians we affirm the core truths of our faith that honor the diversity of both heaven and earth, and recognize that loving people who are different from us is integral to the practice of a religious life.

We also acknowledge that broad generalizations of races, nations, genders, and religions can be found in our sacred texts when interpreted literally and that these texts have been used on occasion to promote opinions that run counter to these core truths.

We hereby affirm our responsibility to interpret our texts in the light of love and inclusion, in heaven's light, and categorically reject interpretations of the Bible or of Swedenborg's writings that promote a racist, anti-Semitic, or otherwise discriminatory viewpoint.



Rebecca Esterson and Terrie Crenshaw

Where any translation or interpretation appears to invite the reader to engage in biased thinking, promote stereotypes, or

justify discrimination against anyone for any reason, regardless of the source, we stand against this. If any member, clergy, employee, or other affiliated person indicates by word, deed, works, writings, affiliations, or any other means, any form of racism, anti-Semitism, or gender bias, this expression does not reflect nor represent the practical doctrine of the Swedenborgian Church.

We also acknowledge that racism, anti-Semitism, gender bias, and other forms of discrimination come in many subtle shades, and that we have a responsibility to regularly investigate our actions and beliefs, both individually and collectively, to align them with these truths, so that we can be greater vessels for Divine Love in the world.

Both the Committee of Ministers and the delegates to the annual convention voted unanimously to affirm the statement and approve study for a standing resolution. ☩