
THE MESSENGER

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Experiencing the NCCC and Church World Service for Myself

Kit Billings

Have you ever attended an event that seemed to release some deep, wonderful energy...an experience that, at times, made your whole being feel warm and touched by love?

This year's annual National Council of the Churches of Christ (NCCC) assembly held in St. Louis, my hometown, was such an event. The Church World Service (which helps organize CROP Walks every year) had their annual meeting here as well. These organizations are partners in helping to ease hunger, poverty, and crisis in our world and nation. I was filling in as one of our denomination's delegates for the Rev. Marlene Laughlin, who remains in our prayers. Our church is one of 36 member communions that make up the NCCC.

In this article, I would like to re-acquaint everyone in Convention with the NCCC and Church World Service. My follow-up article in the February *Messenger* will share more detail about the annual meeting and current projects and issues happening in the NCCC. But first, I feel it is useful to provide an overview of what this organization is about and why I believe it is good that our denomination remains a part of it.

The main reasons I was affected spiritually by this unique gathering were:

- ❖ More than once I felt our large plenary sessions were flowing with love, and our discussions and worship were beautifully alive with faith in Jesus Christ;
- ❖ That organization is living out a great aspect of the Judaeo-Christian faith—helping people who are poor, impoverished, and/or in serious distress or crisis (which is a significant part of God's concern in Scripture).
- ❖ That group of diverse Christians actually cares about focusing more on our spiritual unity rather than on our differences.

I admit I felt quite unsure about going into the first plenary session at this Assembly in my own "backyard" of St. Louis. More often than not when I have been in situations and in close quarters with mainline Christians, I find that they can be rather judgmental of our small Swedenborgian Church. I entered that gathering wondering how truly accepted we New Church

Christians are at this national level of Christian ecumenical life. Perhaps largely due to the many years of good involvement by our Swedenborgian clergy and laity, it felt like the "work," getting ourselves known and recognized, was already done. Yet in addition to this, my own perception was that this very diverse group of Christians not only recognizes the differences and diversity among them, they also *accept* them as being "okay" in God's plan. Through his deep research and meditation upon the Word, Swedenborg wrote that it is God's divine love that actually unifies and connects everyone in heaven and in the church universal and specific; everyone is loved and valued by the Lord. And God ensures that there is some degree and amount of goodness and truth in every religion of the world that the Lord works through to bring his will into our world. My feeling is that the people in those large plenary sessions are simply consciously in touch with the core love of God. Obviously, we all move in and out of a closer connection with the Divine's Love and Wisdom, and there were times when things got rather tense. But by and large, the meetings were wonderfully open to many forms of humor, even the dastardly use of puns, which brought me giggles several times. This gathering realizes, I perceive, that they are much stronger being essentially unified rather than totally separate, and as a diverse group of nearly 50,000,000 believers of Christ we can help the downtrodden in a much more impacting way. Helping the lives of those in desperation connects us with the Lord's powerful truth when he said in one of his great parables:

Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?"

The King will reply, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."

Then he will say to those on his left, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me."

They also will answer, "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?"

He will reply, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me." (*Matthew 25*)

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Reflecting on the Past Year

Ken Turley

Reflecting on the past year, I am again reminded of how joy and pain, celebration and sadness, birth and death exist side by side as we live here on earth... the usual questions come to mind, of why bad things happen to good people, why there is sickness and death, why there is evil at all. But I find myself less concerned about why things are as they are and more concerned about what I am going to do in response to what is. There is much that happens that we have no control over, that is the result of the choices of others, that is even beyond comprehension. But what is clear is that each one of us is given the gift of a life to do with as we will. And so the question arises: "What will you do with the life you have been given?"

Perhaps it is this time of year, when we celebrate the rather artificial and yet oh, so real, demarcation of the new year, that the mind begins to take stock of both past and future; perhaps it is the reverberations of the Christmas season and the unshakable realization that God chose to enter into human life with all of its contradictions... perhaps it is the realization that as each year passes, the time left to work with shortens, and the number of possibilities still open lessens. Life here on earth, in relation to the eternity that awaits, may indeed be but the blink of an eye, but in spite of that, perhaps even because of that, it is still so, so precious. How appropriate it is that the New Year is accompanied by the image of a baby in diapers on its hands and knees, filled with potential and eagerly looking up into the eyes of the old, old man who carries the scythe, ready to harvest and sift all that was once seed and is now fruit on the vine. Between the babe that we all once were, and the sage that we all will at one time be, the question hangs, quivering in the air, "What will you do with the life that has been given you?"

*The Rev. Ken Turley is pastor of the Fryeburg New Church in Fryeburg, Maine.
Reprinted from the January 2002 Fryeburg church newsletter.*

For Your Holistic Health in the New Year

Nancy Adair

Body In the Zone

Your passion can be experienced and identified by a strange hypnotic loss of the sense of time. Reflect back over 2004 and recall six occasions when you lost track of time because you were so fully engaged in whatever you were doing. Answer the questions below for each occurrence.

When you were fully in the moment, what were you doing?

Who were you with?

What allowed you the presence to simply BE?

What elements were present during this time?

How often did this occur for you this past year?

Mind End of Year Beginnings

What we call the beginning is often the end, and to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from.
(T.S. Eliot)

Reflecting over the past year and your current life, are there endings that you need to complete in order to have a fresh start in relationships, work, behaviors? Relax into each ending knowing that it is an opportunity for a new beginning.

Spirit Malzal Tov

The meaning of the Hebrew word Malzal is "constellation of stars." The blessing Mazal Tov means do well, be the stars the Ruler of the universe has blessed you with. Each of us has our own constellation, similar to being dealt a hand of cards. How we play the cards we have been given is entirely up to each one of us. **Malzal Tov**

*Nancy Adair is a member of the Portland, Maine, Swedenborgian church.
Reprinted from the Portland church newsletter, The Appleseed, January 2003.*

New Year's Eve

I like to spend my New Years' eves
In solitude, in humble prayer,
In thanks for each year, as it leaves;
For one more year of God's sweet care.
Then, too, I pray for strength, that I
Might do His will this coming year
And that I might still harder try
To be a friend to those held dear.
I've had my years of "gaiety,"
With parties and a noisy crowd -
And emptiness inside of me
While those around me laugh too loud.
In these, my golden years, I find
The way to end the old year right,
Which gives me joy and peace of mind
Before retiring for the night,
Is blissful hours at home alone,
With music, and a book to read,
And time in prayer for love God's shown
-
It's all I ask . . . and all I need.

Sandra Town Lytle

Reprinted from the 1998 Conference, official magazine of the Western Canada Conference.



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Experiencing the NCCC and Church World Service for Myself

(Continued from cover)

Church World Service and the NCCC work throughout our world helping those who are suffering so greatly, as well as working proactively to help with the almost unimaginable devastation happening in Africa right now due to HIV/AIDS. It is estimated that in the next ten years approximately 70% of all adults in Africa will be dead from AIDS. And yet in spite of these terrifying realities, a bishop of the All African Conference of Churches reported that there is a lot of *hope* in Africa, and much more support and help are needed. One of the highly relevant conclusions from our 9/11 Commission is that one of the ways that more developed countries can minimize the spread of terrorist attitudes and organizations is to better help third-world peoples climb out of desperation. These two organizations are making a difference in helping poverty-stricken and war-torn people to reorganize and develop a better and stronger way of life.

While it is excruciating to hear extensively about millions of dead or dying people in Africa from the HIV/AIDS epidemic (not to mention the millions currently infected with HIV/AIDS in America (and elsewhere), about the children whose bellies are bloated from lack of food (once militants have chased families from their villages) and how many die each year from starvation, and other horrifying realities on our globe, it is gratifying to take time to focus on God's infinite love for all people and how this great power of love seeks justice and peace for all. For indeed, we are all brothers and sisters—we are all children of the One God, and these delegates and leaders deeply *care* about so many who are suffering. It is really awesome to come consciously into contact with the Lord's divine love in this way, which cares deeply for everyone regardless of geography, religion, race, or standing.

There was plenty of humor expressed and enjoyed by everyone, which is a good sign to me of openness, playfulness and trust. Play, as it turns out, is an important way humans (as well as many animals) bond with our own kind. The current president of the NCCC, Bishop Thomas Hoyt, Jr., is one of the warmest, most soulful and playful of the lot. That man radiated love, acceptance, tolerance, sensitivity, and light. He truly was in his use, and he affected me greatly. He often had a wonderful little story to share, or a simple bit of humanness to express, and could easily inspire a good giggle, or even belly laugh.

One story that Bishop Hoyt (who is a tall, impressive African-American man from the Methodist Episcopal Christian Church) shared was what happened the first time he met and talked with the Pope in Rome. As background, the Bishop reminded us that the Roman Catholic Church is not a member of the NCCC, but that they are doing certain projects with

this organization, to further the common good. Well, when Bishop Hoyt met with the Pope, he found himself overcome with the desire to ask for his signature on a book the Pope had written. Both of these clergymen had ambassadors with them, and each deftly got their leader's attention, reminding them that such pleasantries typically did not happen. Well, both men knew what the protocols were, and both decided simultaneously that it was time to let the protocols go and enjoy some simple humanness together. And the way that Bishop Hoyt shared it, made it easy to giggle and enjoy it all, which warmed our hearts quite well.

The General Secretary of the British Council of Churches, who attended this year's NCCC Assembly, spoke at one point, and shared that she was struck by the noticeable energy, spirit, and love in the room where the delegates and officers of the NCCC met. She wondered, at one point, how her own Council might find such spirit.

For me, the primary weakness of the NCCC is that its leaders never once mentioned the reality of staggering, organized and malicious evil in our world, and that there can come times in life when war (a sometimes necessary evil) is needed and important. Swedenborg did indeed write about the often terrible effects upon the souls of people who engage in physical combat and warfare. But he also wrote about the intense necessity, at times, to defend one's nation from organized evil. I believe there are times in life when peacemaking must be re-directed toward protecting our world from highly powerful and growing evil. In my mind, Nazi Germany was one such evil. For me, there are times when justice demands that one nation attacking another (not to mention the horrible rape, pillaging, and other forms of denigration) must be stopped—I love the biblical image of

God's people beating their swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks (*Isaiah 2:4*). I am an advocate, in general, of non-violent forms of resistance and peacemaking. However, given the reality of some organizations in our world, such as terrorist organizations, working to achieve their agendas by killing men, women and children, I believe that some kind of mention at these meetings of honoring the necessity of war at times would have been good. Such brief statements can be expressed in ways that honor each person's freedom to judge whether any particular war is a just or unjust campaign. How else can we faithfully justify the basic need for police forces functioning in our towns and cities? The devastating reality within it all, however, is that innocent men, women and children will be killed, not to mention thousands and thousands of soldiers, too.

Corruption, however, is an ever-present temptation in so many levels of life. And I wish that at least part of the discus-

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One of the highly relevant conclusions from our 9/11 Commission is that one of the ways that more developed countries can minimize the spread of terrorist attitudes and organizations is to better help third-world peoples climb out of desperation.

Experiencing the NCCC and Church World Service for Myself *(Continued from Page 3)*

sion at the NCCC had addressed this aspect of justice and peacemaking in this complex world we live in as we try (and sometimes fail) to love and serve our Lord in our many varied battles between good and evil.

Regarding a spirit of unity over separation, there were two times during “open mike sessions” when people spoke about the importance of Christian unity, one of which took place while the delegates were brainstorming about how we might better strive for connection and mutuality with the evangelical and Catholic Christians in America who still choose to not be members of the NCCC. It is worthwhile noting that recently Christians from the Catholic Church, the evangelical churches, and those within the NCCC are meeting to explore what possible forms of humanitarian aid they all may collaborate in, in service of the Lord. As of yet, no specific avenues and plans for such collaborative Christian charity are in place. NCCC’s Secretary General, Dr. Bob Edgar, has remarked that right now these meetings are more an exploration in “being” rather than “doing.” Yet truly, it is a good start...a milestone to be sure.

The delegates enjoyed a lot of praying, worshiping, and singing together during this annual assembly. People, in general, wanted to listen to one another as we worked for the common good. There were times when some of the delegates got a bit steamed under the collar, but I would say that everyone held their harsher words in check. And it was the love we all felt in and for the Lord that seemed to lead us into caring for all God’s children.

Part of the mission of the NCCC is to foster spiritual unity among a diverse community of Christians. Its Preamble to the NCCC Constitution reads:

The National Council of Churches is a community of Christian communions, which, in response to the gospel as revealed in the Scriptures, confess Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God, as Savior and Lord.

These communions covenant with one another to manifest ever more fully the unity of the Church. Relying upon the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, the communions come together as the Council in common mission, serving in all creation to the glory of God.” (emphasis mine).

More than once certain officers and delegates spoke about the importance of fostering spiritual unity within the NCCC. Swedenborg discovered that Divine Love seeks to connect and unify, while the truth-aspect of God illuminates distinction and differentiation. It was empowering for me to actually experience on a very large scale the unifying power and life of God’s love flowing through that room, especially since that love was intent upon lifting up and nurturing and empowering the lives of human beings, people dying of starvation, disease, and people suffering in despair. Our world has not yet come together and decided to end needless suffering, but at least we can say that there are some who care enough to try.

How can you and/or perhaps your own church community help the Lord’s Spirit of unity, peace and justice to grow in your

area, or perhaps somewhere around the world? There are programs available through the NCCC and Church World Service that any size church can participate in that will help (their websites are below). You can contact Church World Service and get free resource kits, which can help you organize a “blanket and tool drive,” a CROPWALK (a fundraising program helping fight hunger locally and internationally), or become involved with refugee issues happening today.

Together, we can make a much greater difference on the side of the good. Every big or small effort helps. It is empowering and inspiring to seriously reach out and help those beyond one’s common circle of influence. And it is obvious to me that there is a great deal that we in the Lord’s New Church can continue to add to these discussions and to this work of fostering ecumenical and interfaith unity, cooperation and service (which Swedenborgian NCCC delegates like Dorothea Harvey, Bob Kirven, Robert McCluskey, and Mary Ann Fischer have contributed greatly to for many years). I believe in the powerful words of God’s Word that remind us that the Lord is a God of infinite Love, who seeks to inspire justice and peace, where mutual respect and support grow and reign. For we read in the prophet Micah:

He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. (6:8)

And we read in Christ’s great sermon on the mount:

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.” (Matthew 5)

Would you like to be a delegate for our Convention to the National Council of Churches of Christ, U.S.A.? Does your church need to reach further outside of its own walls and extend the usefulness of God’s love in the world? Perhaps this article will further support, or even inspire anew, the power and movement of God flowing through your soul. As a small Christian and universally sensitive denomination, we *can* make a difference. In addition, we are already wonderfully connected to millions of other Christians in our nation who are working very hard to bring new hope and love to those in greatest need. There are many varied uses God has for us. Helping the Lord make his love and support felt in tangible ways—through justice work, through doing one’s daily job fairly and with grace, or through caring for the earth, our children or in one of many other hundreds of ways—help God’s Kingdom come to earth. Where is God’s Spirit drawing you these days?

For more information about Church World Service

<http://www.churchworldservice.org/>

For more information about the NCCC

<http://www.ncccusa.org/>

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SWEDENBORGIAN PARISH ACTION TEAM:

SPAT (for Parish Spats)

Part III of the series: *The Key to the Church*

In November's Messenger, the article "The Keys to the Church" talked about some of the ways the Portland Swedenborgian Church is using our history to improve communication in the present. In December, Part II, "Swedenborgian Parish Action Team in Action" shares some of the tools we are learning to use from parish systems theory. The more we learned about parish systems, the more we felt at home. Then we realized: it's all about bringing Swedenborgian theology to life in the parish!

This third article in the series continues the story...about a little parish...in the not-too-distant future – when we have a great new program for our parishes. Let yourself relax, and move slightly down the road of the future

It was an early spring day in Anytown, USA; only mid-March, yet the sun was shining and birds were singing. Members of the Johnny Appleseed Church were rolling out of bed unusually early for a Saturday morning. They were preparing to attend the second workshop offered by the Swedenborgian Parish Action Team. They knew that they had been having a lot of spats, and were amused to learn that the denomination had recently started a program that everyone was calling "SPAT."

Doug and June Jones were at the church early to get the coffee started. They had spent the week talking about the first workshop, and how strange yet pleasant it was to have had dancing in the sanctuary! They persuaded Nat and Sally Miller to come, saying they really thought that these workshops could change the church.

Mary, the president, persuaded her husband Joe to attend, even though he rarely came to church. He hadn't seen her smiling and laughing when describing a church event in a long time! He was curious to see what these workshops were all about.

Jamie and Judy, two of the teens, told their friends about dancing in church, and several of their friends joined them; teens who didn't normally attend church.

As people gathered, there was more talking and joking than there had been

the week before.

It was a few minutes after nine as the parishioners and pastor of the Johnny Appleseed Church took seats in the sanctuary. An enthusiastic gentleman bounded to the podium. "Hey, mornin', Swedenborgians! I'm Peter Steinke. I write and teach about how systems dynamics impact parishes.

"I hear that you learned a lot of great stuff last week. Now I'm going to help you dive into the waters of systems theory and start swimming together downstream with the flow!

"First, who am I? I'm a Lutheran pastor from Austin, Texas. I've been a parish pastor for fifteen years, a therapist for clergy for fourteen years, and a consultant to congregations for eight years. I've written the popular books *How Your Church Family Works* and *Healthy Congregations* published by Alban. I've got a new one coming out in the spring of 2005. I helped develop *Bridgebuilder*, a process for congregations having conflicts."

***Systems thinking
is like circles
overlapping with
each other.
Every part
has an effect on
every other part.
When anxiety sets
into a system, so
does linear thinking.***

There was some nervous laughter as participants heard themselves in the reference to "conflicted congregations." Rev. Steinke was quick to put them at ease. "Hey, conflict is good, you know. You just gotta learn how to work through it. Which you will know by the end of this series!

"Let's start by reviewing what you learned last week, especially for those who weren't here. OK, I've got some help coming that I arranged for." At that point several teens and adults of the con-

gregation who were known to be musically talented took the stage, setting up drums and tuning guitars. "OK – take it away!" Soon, lively music was wafting through the sanctuary, and the teens – having been clued in earlier – got up and began to dance. It was quite an energetic dance, given the early morning hour on a Saturday. Inspired by the example, several adults joined in.

After a few minutes Steinke held up his hand. "OK. Great! You did this last week. What did you learn from it?" He flipped pages on the easel until finding the notes they had made the week before:

1. Learning to communicate through music and dance.

2. The "new physics" is finding scientific evidence for Swedenborg's explanation of connection.

3. A system is people in connection. If you want to understand the system, you can't just get to know the people as individuals; you must also understand the connection.

Pete Jones was the first to speak up. "It's all about Swedenborg's concept of the Lord. And how quantum physics is finding the same thing in the lab; that there is dancing energy in motion at the core of all existence. It shows that we're all connected."

His wife June wanted to clarify it: "Yeah, and even we here in the church have our own connection, or system."

"And ..." added Judy, their daughter "you can't know our church just by knowing us all as individuals. You gotta know us as this system!"

"Ah, bravo, Swedenborgians! Now let's take this to the next level. I need some energetic and limber folks to demonstrate something important."

As a small group gathered up front, Peter said: "Stand in a circle, hold hands, and look at each other. Great! How does that feel?"

"Peaceful ... harmonious ... connecting" came responses from those in the circle.

"OK," Steinke continued, "now face away from each other, hold hands again, and back in towards each other

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SWEDENBORGIAN PARISH ACTION TEAM:

The Key to the Church

(Continued from page 5)

slowly.” There was a lot of laughter and gasps of surprise as they bumped into each other, began stumbling over each other, and falling into each other in an intertwined heap.”

“This is starting to feel like life around here! No one is looking at anyone; we’re all falling over each other and intertwined.” The participants giggled and those watching chuckled at the sight of the intertwined bodies that couldn’t see each other.

“Now think of something disturbing about your church. Suppose I tell you that the denomination has to cut its funding to you in half, and you won’t be able to keep paying your minister’s salary. How does that feel?” The already-intertwined group began clenching hands and tightening muscles.

“Yikes! This is how it OFTEN feels around here! Tight and tense.”

“Yes, and notice that you can’t talk directly to each other; you aren’t even facing each other.

“Now everyone sit down and look at this.” He drew this on the easel:

A _____ B

“This is linear thinking. Event A causes effect B.”

Then he drew three overlapping circles. “Systems thinking is like circles overlapping with each other. Every part has an effect on every other part. When anxiety sets into a system, so does linear thinking. When people are chronically anxious, they over-focus on others, using a great deal of blame. In an anxious system, people crave answers and comfort. When people feel threatened, they overreact to circumstances and perhaps unintentionally start rumors. They might try to relieve the anxiety by finding someone to blame – a scapegoat. Can anyone think of any examples from recent memory when that’s happened in your parish?”

People looked around sheepishly at each other, and shuffled uncomfortably. Finally Mary, the president, spoke up.

“Well, that does sound a lot like what we did when our previous minister left. We had some people leaving, and couldn’t figure out why. We all got nervous and tried to figure out who to blame. It seemed easiest to blame the minister, so we didn’t renew his contract.”

“Did you tell him why you didn’t renew his contract?”

“Well, no. But I don’t think we knew why.”

“This is a great example, Mary. When there’s anxiety in a church, the system wants to find someone to blame, which momentarily relieves the anxiety. That person is also called the scapegoat. Let me explain why: the concept comes from religious history. A goat is named as “the problem,” and all of the community’s sins are heaped on the back of that goat. It’s sent out of the camp to be a sacrifice for everyone. Then the anxiety goes away and the community goes back to feeling in balance. Of course we’ve learned from our experience with dysfunctional families that when someone is named as the “scapegoat” and forced out, then the problems come back sooner or later. Unless something changes in the system – another scapegoat has to be picked out. Symptoms always continue until the community addresses its healing.”

Everyone was quiet, and they got up in silence to take a coffee break. Pastor Pete looked especially troubled. Mary gave him a guilty glance. As they sat back down, Rev. Steinke spoke to the strange mood of the group.

“So what’s on your minds?”

Pastor Pete spoke up first. “Well, if what you’re saying is true for us, then it’s possible that the previous pastor here was a scapegoat for parish problems.”

“Yeah, that is possible. It’s not uncommon,” Steinke responded softly.

“And if he was the scapegoat driven out of the community, then the system will need another scapegoat. And it might be the next minister – ME!”

Steinke chuckled. “Yeah, that happens a lot in parishes when the issues surrounding one pastor’s leaving aren’t addressed. They just resurface with the next minister to serve. Sometimes, a parish keeps repeating a problem with a whole series of pastors until the issues are faced and resolved.”

“OK, I’ve had enough of this.” Doug Jones, always practical, spoke up. “So maybe this is all true in a lot of parishes. Maybe it’s even true for us. But so what? What do we do about it?”

“Yeah,” chimed in Sally Miller. This was her first workshop and, as a newcomer to the church, she liked to understand how things fit into Swedenborgian theology. “And how does understanding Swedenborg help with any of this?”

“Ah, good! These are great questions, and they show that you are ready to work. I suggest that we break now for lunch, and this afternoon I’ll show you some practical ways to bring about healing, within your theology.”

During lunchtime, everyone congregated to the same section of the room with their plates, all talking together instead of in the little cliques that had characterized the church. They all agreed they had been moved by Steinke’s work with them that morning, but wanted to know if he really had any practical solutions for them.

As they came back together, Peter said, “I was really pleased at the open conversations I heard during lunch. I’ve worked with many churches that thrive on secrecy. People talk behind each others’ backs, for example. That sort of behavior doesn’t lend itself to healing. Healing comes with bringing the secrets to light.”

“Secrets!” Chimed out Jamie, one of the teens. “Secrets! Like, what are they? We get the feeling all the time from the adults that there are deep secrets around here, but no one will tell us what they are!”

The longer-standing members of the congregation looked a bit ashen. Sally, one of the newcomers, stood up. “Hey, no one’s told me any secrets, and I’m an adult! What’s to hide around here anyway?”

“Hey, folks,” Steinke called over the sudden din in the sanctuary. “It’s probable that no one person here knows all the secrets of the past. But many of you hold a piece of a puzzle. If you all talk about it together, you might be able to put the puzzle together and learn some amazing things from the past that are impacting your dynamics today.”

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SWEDENBORGIAN PARISH ACTION TEAM:

The Key to the Church

(Continued from page 6)

There were cries from around the room of “Hey, let’s do it. Let’s figure this out.” The teens were looking especially intrigued.

Mary, mother of a teen, stood up. “Uh, let’s send the teens out while we do this.” There were shouts of “yes!” and “For sure” from the adults and some shouting of “no way!” from teens.

Peter held up his hand. “This is your decision as a congregation. But I urge you to consider letting the teens stay. They inherit the dysfunctions of the past.” There were many heads nodding.

Within moments, they saw several volunteers putting a large roll of paper all around the walls of the sanctuary and marking off years, from the founding of their church to the present.

“We’re going to go through your history here this afternoon. We’ll put in the events that you’ve read about or been told about from the long past. And events you know from your own experiences. But we’ll put up more than the events. Let’s list these things:

Anxiety: Any periods where there seemed to be anxiety in the congregation.

Secrets: Times where there were secrets about. Who knew the secrets? Who didn’t? Do we know yet what was being kept secret? If not, where might the answers be found?

Scapegoats: When did there seem to be a person or group given credit for all of the problems in the parish? What happened to the scapegoat? What happened to the problems?

Leadership: Who was in charge of what when? When were the leaders ordained clergy? When authorized lay leaders? When elected office holders? Who were the informal leaders by virtue of personality or longevity?

Uneasy Balance: Remember our human sculpture this morning, as people fell over each other when trying to maintain balance without looking at each other? When in the history of this parish have people clenched their fists to try and

make things look balanced?

Chaos: When did chaos emerge? Was the chaos used creatively to lead to a new, natural balance? Or swept under the rug for an uneasy balance to return?

Denominational Connection: When was the parish involved with the denomination? When did it distance? Were there times of using the denomination as a scapegoat?

Swedenborgian identity: Were there times of a strong sense of Swedenborgian community? Times of confusion as to parish beliefs and identity? Times of distancing from Swedenborgian theology? Where is the parish now on these areas?

What rumors were around—when? How many have since been explored to determine what is true and what not?

“There are lots more things we could look at, but let’s start with these!”

An excited chaos emerged as people came up to the timeline, grabbing markers. People went to different parts and started putting down things they remembered or had heard.

There had been a plan to end this workshop at 4:30, but at 6 PM, people were still writing and sharing – sometimes in small groups, sometimes all together. Peter Steinke quietly slipped out around 5:00, leaving a note that speakers from the Alban Institute and Interim Ministry Network would be present the next week.

Pizza and Chinese food was ordered by phone as people kept working. Finally, around 8 PM everyone sat together looking at their amazing work.

June, the church secretary stood up. “Well, I’m trying to get all this written down. Here’s a summary of what we’ve written:

“There are five periods of anxiety, secrets, and scapegoats in which a minister left under secretive circumstances. No one knows what happened. Including, actually, the leaving of our last pastor a few months ago. Only a few people know what happened. It’s a secret.” There were some red faces, but no one spoke.

“I’m just listing things here. We know of one major scandal around 100 years ago. Seems the treasurer, the minister, and our savings account all disappeared

about the same time, and no one really knows what happened.”

One of the elderly members spoke up, “My granddad hinted about these things. I think there are some old letters and diaries in our attic I could check out.”

June continued: “We’ve identified six periods of conflicted leadership among the minister, elected leaders, and informal leaders. Including some things a few years back. It doesn’t look like any of it was ever talked about.

“And it seems that we have several times when we couldn’t decide if we were Swedenborgian or not. And what it meant if we were.”


There was silence. Then Sally spoke up, “Would it really make a difference in the present to look at these unresolved things from the past?”

Mary responded, “Well, we don’t know for sure. But I think we have to try.”

“Well, I’m comin’ back next week for sure!” called out Doug. Many voices of agreement could be heard.

“Yeah, and I’m going through those papers in my attic,” responded the elderly parishioner. A number of murmers could be heard of “Yeah, I’ve got a few questions for Grandma,” and “Hmm, what’s in those archives in that cupboard in the basement?”

Slowly and thoughtfully the workshop participants walked into the street and to their cars. As Pastor Pete walked to his car, he stopped, startled. There were no private, secretive discussions taking place in the parking lot! Perhaps, he thought, there really was hope for a radical paradigm shift at the Johnny Appleseed Church.

The Rev. Dr. Wilma Wake is half-time pastor of the Swedenborgian church in Portland, Maine, author of several books, and adjunct Professor of Spirituality with the Swedenborgian House of Studies. 

Every day of our lives we are on the verge of making those slight changes that would make all the difference.

—Mignon McLaughlin
quoted from *The Sun*, November 2004.

GENERAL COUNCIL MEETING

Gloria Toot

General Council met November 5-6, 2004, at Wayfarers Chapel in Rancho Palos Verdes, California, with the entire council present. One of the main items of business at the fall meeting is the budget. The support units had diligently kept costs down in their proposed budgets to Cabinet, who then worked hard at paring the budget down further in preparation for its recommendation to General Council. However, General Council was still faced with an unacceptable deficit in the proposed budget. They voted to have a deficit less than \$100,000. If any further cuts in the budget were made, it would have left only bare bones administrative and no programs, no Council of Ministers, no Central Office. There would be things funded by restricted funds such as *Our Daily Bread* and a few issues of *The Messenger*. This dire situation led to serious discussion of support by the Associations. Money flowing from the membership up, rather than the other way around is the norm in most churches. In the end, each member of General Council pledged to explain the situation to their Association, asking for support for the church in whatever way the Association would or could.

In other items of business, it was decided that the President appoint a committee to develop a set of policies and procedures that guide the placement committee, ministers and congregations in all aspects of ministerial employment transitions. We received all the usual reports, including from the Council of Ministers, from Rev. Eric Allison, COM chair. We received the report from the SHS Representative, Herb Zeigler, and the President was directed to pursue necessary steps to change all remaining references in the Constitution to the Swedenborg School of Religion to the Swedenborgian House of Studies. We reviewed and approved the Wayfarers Chapel budget. We received the Cabinet report and discussed gathering names for a talent pool, especially helpful to have available to the nominating committee. We discussed the request for a pledge toward the Urbana University Capital Campaign Fund, but considering the financial picture of the church, took no action. We discussed whether the Same Sex Resolution was a "standing resolution." We also met as Trustees of the National Church (Washington, DC). In some post-meeting continuation of discussion and email voting it was decided to keep the Council of Minister's position at ¼ time.

Gloria Toot, secretary



BOOK REVIEW

KNITTING INTO THE MYSTERY

by Susan S. Jorgenson and Susan S. Izard

Reviewed by Anna Rich

It seems publishers have yet to put together a knitting book that I won't at least look at, and over the years since I taught myself to knit from a ten-cent-store pamphlet, I've bought quite a few of those books. Though I've made any number of things, I realized back when I was in my twenties—I couldn't possibly live long enough to work up all the patterns I've collected. This gets truer every minute but still, I like to see all those possibilities for creation. I look at the pictures, getting ideas for combining color and texture. I pretty much know how to turn yarn into a sweater, a sock or a hat, but I have begun to wonder why I like to do so.

Knitting Into the Mystery caught my eye because the title suggested it wasn't a collection of another designer's sweaters, but something perhaps about the reasons some people find the craft so pleasurable. It turns out that isn't what the book is about, but it does make good use of the enjoyment people get from knitting. This is the story of groups of (mostly) women who have created a ministry of knitting circles that make shawls for people who are enduring illness and grief and the sweeter milestones of life like new babies. The book begins with the story of how the first knitting ministry formed out of a desire to carry forward the good mood and what Vicky Galo and Janet Bristow learned from The Women's Leadership Institute at the Hartford Seminary. They came up with a project knitting shawls for women with breast cancer and for new mothers. Other women from their class began to join them, and the knitting ministry was born.

One of this book's authors, Susan S. Izard, was given a shawl by a woman in the church where she is an ordained minister of the United Church of Christ. They decided their church needed a knitting ministry and began a knitting circle in January, 2000. Their purpose: "to knit God's love, care, and warmth into shawls for those who needed them." Their meetings, which began with prayer and cozy fellowship, also included the stories of giving away the shawls and the heartfelt thank you notes they received. Shawl recipients attested to the feeling of being cared for and loved, struck that someone would make the effort to pray for and comfort them.

Encouragement barely describes what this gave back to the members of the knitting circle. Those who knit got the benefit of being together in prayer and the bliss of that repetitive, mentally soothing, visually stimulating right-brained activity that is knitting. Those who received the results could declare, Yes, someone thought of me, I felt God's love.

I am reminded how small an effort is sometimes required to do what God asks of us regarding the neighbor. The smallest group could look around and name a few people who could do with the prayers and well wishes of others. It is a tiny thing that can mean so much.

(Continued on page 9)

KNITTING INTO THE MYSTERY

(Continued from page 8)

The book is attractively put together and, apart from a history of the ministry so far, there is advice for starting a knitting circle and instructions for knitting (and crocheting) a shawl.

There are chapters titled Knitting Alone, Contemplative Knitting and Opening Your Heart, Knitting with Others, Keeping a Knitting Journal and Giving Away a Shawl to name just a few. The book also includes a collection of prayers for every occasion of life from birth to death. The well-designed pages are bordered with quotes from scripture, contemporary and historic sages. Both authors are from the Christian tradition; Susan Jorgenson is a Catholic laywoman, and they have tried to allow their book to be open to people of "all traditions, faiths, and expressions."

I was very surprised to find web sites for shawl ministries in churches across the country. I read testimonials from men, women and children who have received shawls and seen snapshots of knitters gathered in the places they meet, work in progress. Grass roots are the best description for what is going on out there with Catholics, Mennonites, Jews and, as reported, a few Buddhists.

The knitting circle started by Susan Izard had completed and given away more than 350 shawls by winter 2003. They have started a project knitting Peace Shawls For Afghanistan distributed through the Afghan Women's Council. They meet with other knitting circles to share stories of their shawls' outreach and healing.

The recommended yarn, Lion Brand's Homespun, changes subtly from one color to another, giving the eye a treat and for about \$15.00 (unless you catch a good sale) you can buy the three skeins needed to make a shawl 30" x 64" not including the fringe. Being worked with size 13 needles, progress is quick although the thick needles are a little clumsy and take getting used to.

I asked my husband Harry to decide between the two colors I gravitated toward, noticing later that he'd picked a color combination called Corinthian. The yarn is machine washable and dryable and very soft and light. The pattern is easy enough for a novice knitter, yet stimulating for an old hand; perfect for TV watching since if you keep that 1-2-3, 1-2-3 stitch pattern in your head, you don't have to look at what you're doing.

The choice of stitch pattern wasn't accidental, Vicky Galo arrived at the choice through prayer. The pattern: K3, P3, a pattern of threes has significance in many religions and in nature. Worked in textured Homespun, it can be subtle and forgiving if a stitch is out of place, in a smoother yarn the pattern is more discernible but very charming and it lies flat, no blocking needed. I chose size 13 needles, the smaller size 11 is also recommended; a smaller shawl will result. As directed I cast on 57 stitches (any multiple of three will do) and knit K3, P3 until the end of the row, ending with a K3. The next row is exactly the same.

I began knitting a prayer shawl when I started thinking about writing this article. I had no idea what went through my mind (if anything) while I knit; I wanted to try knitting and praying together. It turns out my knitting happens like most people's I think, while I am doing something else that is also not entirely absorbing (TV and radio are good as are pot watching and the playground.) and it has the quality of being picked up and put down, carried here and there, interrupted but completed one stitch at a time. There were only a few times I picked up this project when something else wasn't happening for me to focus on. If I waited until there was nothing else to focus on to knit, I wouldn't.

When I did sit calmly with my knitting, I found my mind did a sort of meditation dance, I was always bringing it back gently, from some dusty corner it was pressing itself into like a blind mouse. More than halfway through this project, I decided that my husband might like this for when he meditates early in the morning and I tried praying for Harry while I worked but I think I was trying too hard in some way and it felt lacking. However, a recent, previous project was a cardigan for my son Otto. I spun the yarn with a drop spindle and Otto helped me dye it with Kool-Aid. On that project I realized I was always thinking about him and being thankful for him. Message to self: don't try too hard. I have a second prayer shawl in progress started with the recipient in mind. With that done, it feels quite natural to hold that person in my mind and ask for God's love and care for them.

Anna Rich is a member of the New York Swedenborgian Church.



NEWS *Parish*

Social Action

Swedenborg
Chapel,
Cambridge, Mass.

Hand-in-Hand with Bread and Jams

Jackie Lageson

On June 1, 2004, the Bread & Jams day shelter began providing services at Swedenborg Chapel. Their vision statement: "Our vision is to be a model for improving the quality of life for the homeless and others in need. Their mission statement statement: "Bread & Jams, a compassionate, professional, and ethical organization, provides a safe and supportive environment to the homeless community and others in crisis, by offering tailored services and tools to encourage a sense of community, self-advocacy, and empowerment with openness and respect." You can learn more about the program by going to www.breadandjams.org.

Bread & Jams provides services Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. They provide a daily prepared meal, clothes, and connection to services such as access to overnight

(Continued on page 11)

Classic Swedenborgian Novels Available

The Information Management Support Unit (IMSU) is pleased to announce that two late 19th century novels by New Church writer James Spilling are now available in Acrobat format in the Online Swedenborgian Library:

The Evening and the Morning, by James Spilling, is an engaging 1877 didactic novel that introduces many New Church teachings in the context of a story of love and of overcoming materialistic skepticism. This is perhaps the best of Spilling's novels.

http://www.swedenborg.org/library_detail.cfm?documentID=431&catID=167

This delightful classic will become available next year in paperback through Print On Demand. Meanwhile, you can read it online, or download and print the pages for reading offline.

Our Society: A New Church without an Old Ecclesiasticism, by James Spilling, is an 1882 novel that tells the tale of a group of New Church believers obliged to break their connection with their local Protestant parish and form their own church society.

In my opinion, toward the end the novel focuses too much on issues of how to finance the church—and how not to. However, along the way it deals with many issues, both doctrinal and practical, faced by early Swedenborgians as they wrestled with the question of whether to stick with their existing churches or form separate churches—and if the latter, how to set them up. This novel will appeal mostly to New Church ministers and active lay people. But others may also enjoy some of the doctrinal discussion and debate that unfolds during the course of the story.

http://www.swedenborg.org/library_detail.cfm?documentID=433&catID=167

Our Society is not slated to be published by Print On Demand, and it is a scarce, hard-to-find book. So IMSU is pleased to be able to make it freely available online. Our thanks go to the Library of the Swedenborgian House of Studies for making a copy of this book available to IMSU for scanning.

If there is sufficient interest, we will produce online editions of more of Spilling's novels.

Meanwhile, enjoy these two classics in the New Year!

--Lee Woofenden, Chair
Information Management Support Unit

Lee Woofenden is pastor of the
Bridgewater Swedenborgian Church. ☸

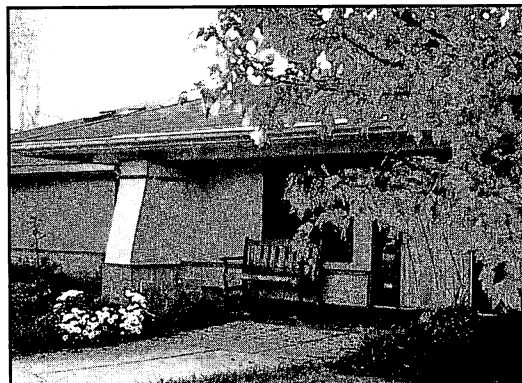
Temenos Offers Free Midweek Accommodations to Denominational Meetings

The Church Council of the Swedenborgian Church at Temenos voted on November 14, 2004 to make an in-kind donation to the work of our denomination. The Council has authorized the Temenos Retreat Center, our church's outreach ministry, to offer free midweek accommodations for all Convention Boards, Committees and Support Units as well as events of the Council of Ministers. This offer includes our Retreat House for Sunday to Thursday meetings and some selected weekends at our Farm House based upon availability.

For more information, please contact Deane Currie at 610-696-8145 or information@temenosretreat.org



Above photo: Farmhouse



Right photo: Closeup view of Temenos Retreat Center entrance.

In The Garden

Out here, under the sky of a late
Autumn evening
With the sea a quiet not-too-far-off
murmur

I tilt my head toward earth's
unbounded roof and see
The stars—the light of the eyes of
all the souls in heaven—
Showering their tenderness down
upon us, across all the pasts of
Heavy burdens of shared memories.
And not forgetting the gifts those
burdens give still I hear them
Whisper in the alive stillness
of the night,

If you want, if you want, if you want
Give and give and give, and giving
receive and receive
And receive the present of today
when they brought me here
to know you
And come again to love.

Bette Mc Donnell
11/8/04



Births

Billings—the Rev. Kit Billings and his wife Penny joyously welcomed the birth of a baby girl, Julia Renee Billings, December 8, 2004, in St. Louis. Kit is the pastor at the Church of the Open Word in St. Louis. Julia's middle name was given in honor of Kit's beloved sister Renee Billings-Machiniak, pastor of the Church of the Holy City Swedenborgian church in Royal Oak, Michigan.

Hamilton—Heather Fick and Chris Hamilton, members of the Church of the Holy City in Royal Oak, Michigan, welcomed the birth of a baby boy, Oliver Burtrand Hamilton, at home September 29, 2004.

Lee—the Rev. Junchol Lee and his wife Heejoung joyously announce the birth of a baby boy, Roiy, December 11, 2004, in Cleveland. Junchol is the pastor at the Swedenborg Chapel in Cleveland. Roiy is from a Hebrew word meaning shepherd.

New Members Welcomed

Green and Hinrichsen—Jim Green and Nick Hinrichsen were welcomed into membership at the Church of the Holy City in Royal Oak, Michigan, in a confirmation service October 17, 2004, the Rev. Renee Billings Machiniak officiating.



NEWS Parish

(Continued from page 9)

homeless shelters in the area, substance abuse programs, psychological one-on-one counseling, acupuncture, medical doctor visits, employment opportunities, and computer access.

Initially, the collaboration between Bread & Jams and Swedenborg Chapel was a three-month lease arrangement. In mid-August, the Bread & Jams Board of Directors approached the Cambridge Society's officers requesting a long-term arrangement to continue operating out of the Swedenborg Chapel. On September 1, we entered into a two-year rental lease with Bread & Jams.

The arrangement has created numerous opportunities for more effective ministry to the homeless at the Swedenborg Chapel. Often, prior to our collaboration with Bread & Jams, individuals in need would come to the Chapel requesting assistance and the best we could do was to send them to various programs in the area. However, we were unable to provide any direct connections or to assist in actually opening doors to these services. Bread & Jams has a history of direct relationships with the myriad services available in the area and is able directly to open the doors

to the services. On an average, Bread & Jams serves thirty individuals a day.

The Men-In-Transition program at Swedenborg Chapel has been able to provide services to Bread & Jams for the men and women coming to their program who have been released from correctional facilities to the community with nowhere to live. Bread & Jams works to fulfill their housing needs, while the Men-In-Transition program connects them to programs and networks that assist with the unique needs of recently released individuals. In addition, our Social Action Ministry Intern from the Harvard Divinity School, Will VanDoren, works with Bread & Jams in ministering to their clients and assisting the staff with the day-to-day challenges of their work.

The Bread & Jams Board of Directors and the Cambridge Society are collaborating to provide more services to the homeless and formerly incarcerated populations, and we continue to build our mutual programmatic focus on providing uses to the surrounding Cambridge community. To this end, we are making plans to install a shower for the client use, organize storage space in the basement for food pantry items, and convert a closet area to office space in the function room. Unfortunately, there is an ever-growing population of underserved citizens whose basic human needs of housing, food, and work are out of their reach due to a number of social and per-

TO THE EDITOR

(The following letter was sent to the Rev. Dr. Wilma Wake, and we received permission from Rev. Rhodes to publish it in *The Messenger*.)

Dear Rev. Wilma Wake:

My copy of the Nov 04 *Messenger* arrived in the morning mail, and though I do not always read it completely, I was profoundly moved by your sad but powerful "The Key to the Church." I read all the issue (and enjoyed it) and noticed quite a few well-known friends, and felt impelled to let you know that your message somehow assures me that your work will be successful for our beloved Swedenborgian Church. I intend to share your article with my friends. Thank you for its message and we wish you our very best.

As editor for our weekly newsletter in the past, I am able to sense the feelings behind the articles; even the picture with quite a few recognizable faces. [referring to *Gathering Leaves* group photo and Louise Rose's article, "A Balanced Tree."]

Louise Rose is my sister-in-law, and we have fine paintings by Frank and also their son, Owen.

The best of luck, keep up the good work.

Leon

Rev. Leon Rhodes
Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania



sonal variables. The fastest growing segment of the homeless population consists of women with children. Please keep this program and the many homeless men, women, and children in your prayers.

Jackie Lageson is the Cambridge Chapel administrator and director of Social Action Ministry.
Reprinted from the November 2004 Swedenborg Chapel newsletter.



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 15 years after his death. This 1787 organization eventually spawned the present General Convention of Swedenborgian Churches. As a result of Swedenborg's own spiritual questionings and insights, we as a church today 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. Swedenborg shared in his theological writings 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 would conclude, "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.

CONVENTION 2005

"Spirituality and Creativity"

July 9th-13th, Berkeley, California

The Swedenborgian House of Studies is delighted to host the 2005 annual convention of the Swedenborgian Church of North America! We warmly invite you to visit your seminary—located in Berkeley since 2001—and to get acquainted with our new environment for theological education.

Convention is a special time for us to come together as a denomination, to take stock of where we have been and where we are going, and to reflect on how our faith tradition can be of use in today's world. We hope you will come and be a part of this conversation.

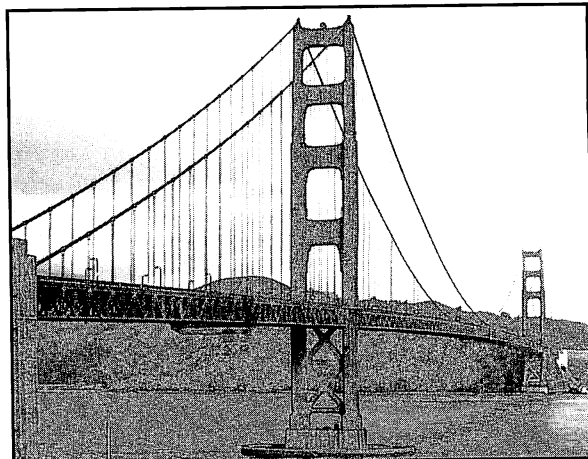
Prepare to be moved and inspired: this year's theme will center on creativity as an expression of the divine working within and among us. Made in our Creator's image, we are all creative. Whether you create music, dance, paintings, poetry, a business plan, a good meal, a game with your children or find your creative light in surfing, golfing or rock

climbing, the creative process helps us make the divine-human connection. For as Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "There is higher work for Art than the arts."

Convention will take place on the Foothill campus of the University of California, just a few blocks from Pacific



Foothill



Golden Gate

School of Religion and SHS.

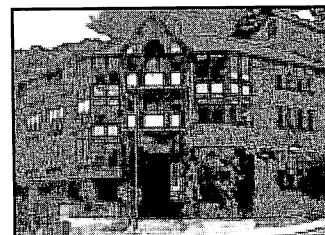
Accommodations will be in modern and beautiful dormitory buildings, and we will enjoy fresh California cuisine in the high-ceilinged cafeteria fitted with redwood-tree columns. The many attractions of the San Francisco Bay Area will be accessible for sightseeing, including Berkeley, San Francisco and the Napa Valley wine country.

Watch *The Messenger* for future updates about special programming and events! We look forward to seeing you there!

—Kim Hinrichs
Program Director
SHS



Foothill room



Foothill exterior

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