

CHRISTIAN OUTREACH DEPARTMENT

GOD, GIVE US COMFORT

Irja Eskelinen

John 11:25-26:

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die;²⁶ and whoever lives by believing in me will never die."

White Ribbon sisters all over the world joined their Norwegian counterparts in sharing in their hearts the grief that dozens of Norwegian families had to encounter on a July summer day. There is so much grief, sadness, fear, and hatred in our world. Amidst it all we can only turn our anguished faces to God and plead:

Almighty and Merciful God, the giver of life and conqueror of death, give us comfort in our grief. No matter how great our longing, no matter how deep the sorrow in our hearts, fill them with hope. Send your angels to care for the families who lost their loved ones as a result of this terrible act. Dry our tears and give us peace. Our Lord and Savior, you know and understand all things. Set us free from the illusion of control in our lives. Set us free from the illusion of strength and being able to cope alone.

Remove his grave clothes and let him go, you once said to those who were mourning Lazarus. He returned to life from death, but we mourn the ones who will not return. Comfort us in the moments when light and darkness become one. In the moments when dreams are crushed to memories, give us strength.

Those of us who remain, help us lean on You for as long as our shadowed and question-bound lives last.

Encourage us to hold on to your promises, as did long-suffering Job in the Bible:

*I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth.
And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God;
I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another.
How my heart yearns within me!* (Job 19:25-27)

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Irja Eskelinen, World Director

Fall Project Ideas

Here are some easy and inexpensive project ideas for your personal spiritual living development. Enjoy them with your White Ribbon and Church sisters!

Sunday School Sponsor

Find someone in your church, neighbourhood or workplace who is looking for a spiritual path or who needs encouragement in life. Invite them to go to Sunday School with you e.g. for a month. If appropriate, arrange transportation. Offer some company to reflect on the thoughts and experiences that arise from these visits.

Card Campaign

Purchase or make 5 note cards. Pray and reflect on anyone you know who might need extra support. Write a card for each one of these people, express why you find that person precious and share your willingness to offer a helping hand or some company. This can be done with a prayer group or at a church event. Mail the notes or hand them out personally "just because".

Spiritual Holiday Gifts

Choose a Christmas card with a spiritual theme. Instead of a typical Christmas letter or greeting, write a personal message sharing your faith, how you found God in your life and how your faith has helped you. Send this spiritual Christmas gift to the people close to you.

Year-end Inventory

As the year comes to its end, write in your journal about the important events that have taken place in your life in the past year and what you have learned from them. Set a goal to use what you have learned to bless other people. One sister wrote: *My husband was seriously injured in a car accident where the passenger seat was completely destroyed. I am grateful that my husband is recovering from his injuries and that I was not with him, so that I can support him and continue my life. I will bear testimony of God's mercy, guidance and love to others who are in a difficult situation.*

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ON THE ROAD TO BETHLEHEM

Irja Eskelinen

When my child was small, I purchased a picture book called *On the road to BETHLEHEM*. I remember the two of us reading it together and looking at the pictures. The book was so effective in delivering the Nativity message in an intense and touching way that I became immersed in the mystery of Christmas and its message of peace and joy. Those moments were like the Nativity plays we performed in primary school, fully embracing the story. Someone had brought a doll to play the part of Jesus and the shepherds wore their mothers' dish towels wrapped around their heads. The message was crystal clear: the message of God being born at Christmas to save mankind was real to us.

In these past years, holiday responsibilities at work and at home have turned my thoughts to less important points. Is there enough food, are everyone's gifts appropriate, did I send my Christmas cards on time, is my husband's sweater the right color and size?

Even this year, we are witnesses to the event that changed the whole world's chronology. One of my most cherished "new" Christmas carols is in Swedish and it's called *Himlen I min famn, Heaven in my arms*. It's Mary's lullaby to baby Jesus. The lyrics contain some questions the young woman had when she suddenly found herself in the center of God's great plan:

*You my little child named by an angel.
Have I given you in birth to be the treasure of the earth?
Are you truly heaven laying cradled in my arms?*

When I was serving in my first year in a parish, I remember the sermon I gave on Annunciation Day. It was an inspiring and an enlightening opportunity. I got to look at Mary, not from a picture book perspective, but as a woman who bore a terrible pain in her heart. Still, Mary had the courage to accept a sacred calling, to do God's will, and to trust God's mercy in all things.

God's immense plan to save us cost Mary a mother's heartbreak. But still, Mary had the courage to say: I am the Lord's servant, may it happen to me as you have said. The greatest treasure in Christianity is the idea of a God who has become man, a God who bore the weight of our burdens and sins. In order to be able to bring us salvation, God was born into our pain, our poverty, and our alienation.

The road to BETHLEHEM reminds us that in this world, nothing is of too little importance to touch God. The misery of our world could dethrone God from His mighty throne - had He not willingly taken our pain and misery upon Himself.

I wish you a blessed Jesus' birthday in all corners of the world!

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2012 Projects

Spiritual Easter Fast

Some Christian churches have a tradition of fasting in preparation for Easter. This year you could join this tradition by participating in a spiritual fast. We all have qualities and characteristics we would like to change in ourselves. A spiritual fast is a wonderful opportunity to work on one or several such characteristics. Look up Easter in your calendar and mark 10 weeks before Easter. Designate 5-10 minutes per day for personal prayer and Scripture study about your chosen topic. If my chosen topic is to become more charitable, I would look up passages on what Jesus did and how he reacted to the people he encountered. Then I would try to remember the passage throughout the day and make an effort to do what Jesus would do. Writing a journal about this experience is the best way to achieve a change in personal behavior. Journaling could be done on Sundays if it's the calmest day of the week. You could come to church a little early and write while you wait for services to begin. At the end of your fast, at Easter, evaluate how you have changed and write in your journal a note of thanks to God for helping you.

Making your scripture places and events come alive

Take yourself on a virtual tour of the Bible passage you are currently reading. For example, if you are reading about the man with the impure spirit at the East of Jordan (e.g. Mark 5), you can visit Lake Gennesaret or the ruins of the city of Capernaum. Here are some sites that could be useful:

<http://www.biblewalks.com> and <http://www.holylandvirtualtour.com/sitelist.html>

Both sites are easy-to-use virtual tours with scripture references.

http://www.tjschu.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1&catid=1&Itemid=5

This is a database listing of many virtual visit sites with evaluation on technical skills required. Most useful in teaching.

<http://holyland-pilgrimages.com/>

Tour itineraries for real-life tours, follow the itinerary and take yourself on a virtual tour.

<http://www.sacred-destinations.com/israel/sacred-sites>

Extensive listing of Christian places of interest around the world. Israel is given as an example here.

Organizing a virtual tour

Plan an evening or an event at your White Ribbon Union or church for interested members and friends and take them on a tour of the Bible sites you have visited through books or on the Internet. Do as if you were going to take a trip: plan an itinerary and find out what you need to know about each destination. Read the corresponding Bible stories aloud before you "visit" the places. You could do this as a group project and have each person prepare one place to visit. As you walk in Jesus' footsteps, testify about your faith in Him.

IN JESUS' FOOTSTEPS

Irja Eskelinen

Most biblical events have a geographical context: they happened somewhere. They also have a historic context; they happened during a certain era. Knowledge about the countries where Bible events took place can in many ways make the spiritual message come alive. It takes some knowledge about the background to be able to place ourselves in those times and places. As we take a stroll in the authentic scenes, in our imagination, an experience of the truth and reality of those events is created. Many people claim that religious history should be classified next to stories and fairy tales. As we become familiar with Bible history, the classification changes as we begin to talk about real people and places- about real lives.

How can White Ribbon sisters make their spiritual talk come alive, even when they are unable to literally follow Jesus' footsteps in Israel? If I read a text about Capernaum where many Gospel events took place, in my thoughts I walk at the shore of Lake Gennesaret. It appears to be a rather small lake with no islands. Still, it is over four miles across. In the spring, the hills around the lake are covered in bright red poppies. There are only ruins left of the city of Capernaum, but even the ruins tell us about ancient life. One remarkable building was a church which was built on the ruins of a more ancient church. According to traditional knowledge, that church was built at the site of a first century private home, which was the dwelling of the apostle Peter.

I often think about the trip that Jesus took across the lake. The events are recorded in all the Gospels. "Across the lake" means the East shore, where pagan territory began. It was there that Jesus met the man with an impure spirit. He had been the terror of the area for who knows how long. But now he is sitting, healed, at Jesus' feet. He asks to stay with Jesus, but his answer reads: *"Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you."* (Mark 5:19). So he goes and becomes the first missionary in his area. That is all the Bible tells us about him, but I like to continue this train of thought. It may be a bit imaginative, but imagination opens up marvelous visions. Here we have the evangelist of the East of Jordan. The Bible describes in detail what Paul did West of Jordan. Archeology tells us about the hundreds of church ruins that are located East of Jordan. Christianity was widely spread East of Jordan as well- did that happen through the actions of this man Jesus had healed - the most miserable of all men who encountered Jesus? Jesus' healing and saving the man with an impure spirit underlines the strength of God's might: the one who is most disadvantaged in the eyes of man can become an instrument of God. Such a personality was also Mary of Magdala who lived across the lake. She had had an impure spirit and she became the one who was sent from the tomb to spread the message about Jesus' resurrection.

The majority of Gospel sites are situated in Galilee and Jerusalem. Both sceneries and archeological discoveries are available in books. The Internet can also be a valuable source that provides access to Bible sites. Sisters who work with children can draw Bible events on maps. Such activities could be for example cities where David escaped Saul who threatened his life. The escape is described in many Psalms that explore David's feelings at the time.

The Gospel is always the essence. *But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name (John 20:31).*

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FROM SOLITUDE TO INVOLVEMENT

Irja Eskelinen

The essential principle of Christian life is based on the Golden Rule taught by Jesus in Matt. 7:12: *do to others what you would have them do to you*.

It is wonderful that this principle was selected to create the foundation of the White Ribbon movement. Christianity is basically a message about involvement, about the possibility that each person can partake of God's grace and its new-found humanity. The purpose of the church is to call people to partake of this grace and share their lives together. How can we White Ribboners be the hands of Christ and make Jesus' rule become a reality?

Pastoral care means helping, supporting, and comforting someone in all stages of life, in sadness and in joy, in sickness and in health. The source of all help, support, and comfort is God's love, which in pastoral care is mostly communicated through interaction, presence, listening, and respectfulness.

The everyday method of pastoral care is discussion, and its holy methods are God's word and the Communion.

The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms. (Deuteronomy. 33:27)

Each one of us has been called to serve as pastoral care providers for each other, to be messengers of God's grace and love in this tough world. We White Ribbon sisters have such a great calling that we may sometimes find it frightening. Am I capable of helping a person who is struggling in her difficulties? We can trust that in these circumstances that the strength and wisdom to do what is best will be given to us as long as we are willing to accept God's guidance.

My mother had a book called *Can we listen and help?* She had received it from a friend for her birthday. It was one of the most popular pastoral care books in our country. Discussion is the most common pastoral tool and it is available to everyone. In discussion we are face to face with a person who compassionately listens to what we wish to say.

Active listening is one of the most essential skills in pastoral care. A pastoral caregiver is interested in hearing different accounts about life and death, work and emotions. In pastoral dialogue, new insights can be opened to the person receiving pastoral care and she can be gently invited to ponder her relationship with God. These dialogues must remain confidential for it is a great gift to receive someone's trust in sharing the burdens of her heart with us.

Discussion and prayer are close to each other. Anything that comes up in a discussion can be spoken to God in prayer, thus giving words to human anguish. Prayer does not always need words, for God hears even our faintest sigh.

Our Father who art in Heaven is a part of common Christian prayer heritage. Many prayers we said as children come back to us in times of crisis. They may never have been forgotten, just set aside in the less used parts of our memory. Most people like to cross their hands in prayer.

Let us embark on this road with courage so that we, in faith and confidence in God, can encounter our suffering fellow beings.