
Dialogue

Volume 7 Issue 2

Strength for the church's journey into wholeness in Christ

April 2005

The subject: *Relying on Miracles*

This quarter we have collected some writers who want to explore what it means to depend on what only God can do. So there won't be too much "theory," here, mostly just stories. Jane collected stories about how people came to faith. Juanita has tales of our miraculous acquisition and improvement of buildings this year. Rod is convincing us to act in faith and experience what will lead to more stories. Chris collected stories about personal experiences of God intervening when we prayed.

All in all, there is a lot of encouragement in this issue to trust God and call on his strength. —ED.

Stories of Conversion: Journeys toward Faith

Talking to new believers about their faith was like listening to someone who has just fallen in love. And I guess it's the same thing, really. Meeting Jesus, like meeting a soul mate, opens a person to new emotions on a grand scale. It shows a person new ways to relate to others, releases them from bad habits, gives them direction.

I highly recommend starting a conversation with someone about their faith journey—whether it is new or old. You will surely enjoy a story of a fresh, new love life with Jesus. Some good questions to get a conversation going: How did it happen that you opened yourself to a Savior? What made you decide to follow Jesus? How has your life changed? How do you feel about

this? As you listen to a story like this, you may take a deep breath and say, "Oh, yes. That is what Jesus does for us." Or, "Of course. Now I remember why I'm doing this."

Read these stories and find hope and peace, trust and love, community and joy. Hear the questions, but see the blind faith. Each of these people has opened him or herself to Jesus in a life-changing way. May we find strength in their stories.

Howard Pinder

"I think I always believed in God, but I wasn't seeking anything or trying to live a certain way," explained Howard Pinder. His story is about converting a basic belief into a way of life.

"In the past, I wasn't totally con-



verted, he shared. "I never had a relationship with Jesus. I was selfish, and I wanted to know what God could do for me. Now I am thinking like a servant, and I am learning how to hear what God wants. I'm trying to live like Jesus, not just believe in him. God doesn't need secret worshippers. We need to show love towards people."

Howard's dad is a pastor in a United Church of Christ church. His mom is a chaplain in a nursing home. Both of them are "religious" people, but they did not force their faith on their children. "They left it up to us to figure out," Howard shared.

Howard left home to attend Temple University, where he studies English. His mother heard about Circle of Hope when Howard was a sophomore, and she suggested that he check it out. "I visited and I liked it, but I wasn't there

yet," Howard said. "Then I asked Rod about the cells and he invited me to his. It took me a while to decide to go. I was afraid of what it would bring, that I'd get pushed or tested."

Eventually Howard visited the cell group, and the people there impressed him. "Everyone was so genuine," he said. "I could see the love they felt for each other and I wanted that, so I returned to cell. I have now been going about 7 months."

"The people in my cell are amazing," shared Howard. "They are a little older than me, and they all have careers actively helping people. They are inspiring and I learn a lot. The interaction and connection at cell is special."

Howard said he has experienced a lot of change within himself. "It's different on the inside, and it's how I act with people," he said. "I'm trying to become more active, to live as a Christian. I am still figuring out how to share my faith."

Gwyneth Duncan

About a year ago, a friend asked Gwyneth Duncan about prayer, and Gwyneth said that she did it. The friend asked her, Do you think you are being heard? and Gwyneth said, Yes I am. "That was the first time I realized that something had changed," she said. "I hadn't felt it before."

At the time, Gwyneth had been conducting a kind of experiment. She had grown up with a Jewish mother and Catholic father and the family had celebrated holidays for both religions. Neither faith felt right to her and she was basically opposed to religion. Then when she was 15, she started to date a boy named Ben White, whose father just happened to be a pastor.

"I argued with Ben and was very antagonistic," she remembered. "I couldn't imagine that I'd ever believe anything myself." Over the years, Ben introduced Gwyneth to Circle of Hope, and she attended occasionally, but it never meant anything. At the end of her sophomore year of college, she visited again, and that's when she de-

(Continued on page 2)

cided to really explore Christianity. Ben was on his way to Mexico for a year, and she knew that she'd have a lot of time to think on her own.

"I decided to commit to going to church even if I didn't get it," she said. "I wanted to try to figure it out because I was not satisfied not knowing if it was true or not. The worship time was freaky at first, and I was not comfortable singing along. But then I started singing anyway. And I also started praying every night."

One night a friend started to ask her questions about her experience. Why was she doing it? Was it just for Ben? "If I were

doing it for Ben, I would have done it five years ago!" Gwyneth replied. She told her friend that she still was not a Christian, so it was obviously not something she was doing just for Ben.

"Then I got home that night, and I felt weird saying that I was not a Christian. So I opened my journal and I wrote I AM A CHRIS-

TIAN. I just declared it. I did not expect to feel so excited about it! I wanted to tell Ben, so I wrote him a letter. But the next day I decided to call him instead, because as I reflected on it, I realized that something huge had happened. I wanted to tell him right away."

"Ben was not as excited as I was, and I didn't understand why," Gwyneth shared. "He said that sometimes it's hard to believe it when God answers your prayers. Since he was coming home a month later, we had a chance to talk about it face to face. That felt good."

The weeks following her declaration of faith were difficult for Gwyneth. There was a lot of stress between her and her Jewish mother. "My mom thought that I was doing it for Ben, and that I wasn't making my own decision. But even through that, I still felt hope. And I am learning that it doesn't matter what others think." Now conversations with her mom are a little better and with Ben's help, the three of them are working through their differences.

Because of the difficulty with her mom, Gwyneth feared telling friends about her new faith. After a while she shared her news, and she was relieved to find out that they still loved her. "It's hard to express my faith to them," she shared. "People expect flashes of light or something huge like that. My journey was almost a two-year

process. It was gradual, not just one momentous occasion."

"I'm still so excited about my new faith," she shared. "I'm learning so much everyday about who Jesus is. The relationship is developing and I'm learning to trust in it."

Paul Wilkins

Paul Wilkins says he has had a hard life. "I was born in Trenton, and when I was growing up, there were drugs and alcohol all around me, all over the streets."

So I opened my journal and I wrote I AM A CHRISTIAN. I just declared it. I did not expect to feel so excited about it!

"I think that I lucked out and found God," ... "It's true you know: seek and you will find. Knock on the door, and He'll open it."

At the age of 15, Paul was involved in the street life. "I was totally out of it," he said. "I was involved in all kinds of things. I had a bad relationship with my parents."

His sister was living in Hawaii and she invited him to live there with her. "I lived in Hawaii for seven months, but only four of them were in her house. I was so out of it with drugs and alcohol that she eventually kicked me out."

On the streets in Hawaii, Paul got even more involved with drugs and alcohol. "It was a part of my everyday life. I was out on the streets and had completely lost myself. But God found me where I was."

Paul said that one day he was in a bar completely drunk and getting drunker. All of a sudden, all that he could think about was water. The urge to find water was so strong; he simply needed to get it.

"I was drunk, but I knew that I just had to leave the bar to find water," he said. "So I left, and right outside the bar there were a bunch of Christians who were handing out water." Paul met Pastor John who gave him water. And then they prayed together. With lots of help and support from Pastor John and his church, Paul got himself together. "I became sober and I converted to a Christian lifestyle," he said.

Paul stayed in Hawaii a little longer before returning to Trenton. When he got there, he found out that his father was in jail and his mom had lost the house. He decided to come to Philadelphia to start his life over. He moved from shelter to shelter and finally ended

up at Covenant House, around the corner from Circle of Hope Northwest. At Covenant House, Paul met someone who introduced him to Circle of Hope, where he met Bryan Robinson.

Now he's in Bryan's cell, but hopes to soon lead a cell of his own, along with Calvin Skinner. Paul feels at home in Philadelphia, especially at Circle of Hope. "I feel like I have been progressing so fast," Paul shared. "Eventually I want to be a preacher."

Aaron Santos

"I think that I lucked out and found God," shared Aaron Santos, a regular attendee at Circle of Hope East. "It's true you know: seek and you will find. Knock on the door, and He'll open it."

Aaron grew up Jewish. "My childhood was very Jewish. My grandparents were Orthodox. My mom was not quite orthodox, but I went to synagogue every week, learned Hebrew and all that. I wasn't really sure why, though." At 13, Aaron had a bar mitzvah, and after that, "I quit religion. I just didn't believe in God," he said.

Aaron was an atheist until he was about 18 or 19. "I hated religion," he shared. "I thought Christianity was stupid, that people who believed in God

(Continued on page 3)

Dialogue

WHY? *This quarterly journal is a gift to everyone who wishes to be a part of the ongoing dialogue we share in Christ that forms us and deepens us as a real church. Whether you just arrived or have been with us from the beginning, we want you to be part of the conversation and an informed member of the team. We hope you will work with us to build a safe place to experience and share the love of Jesus Christ. Dialogue is a crucial part of that.*

If you would like to respond to any of the articles printed, that would be great. We have never turned a response away, yet — but we reserve the right to do so.

were stupid and that it was all just a waste of time." In high school, he tried out a youth group for a while because it was the "cool" thing to do, but he felt that it, too, was stupid.

"I decided to take a year off before going to college, and I ended up going to Alabama to be close to a girl I met online." Ironically, that girl was a Christian who was attending Bible College. "At that point I was not such an angry atheist. I felt that it was fine for someone to believe, as long as they would leave me alone about it." His girlfriend took him to church a couple of times, but she never insisted that he be a Christian, so he was fine with it.

"After I turned 19, I started to think more about God and religion," Aaron said. "I wondered, what did it mean? Why would Jesus do this? I was thinking and seeking but finding nothing. Even a week or two before I finally became a Christian, I still thought it was all stupid."

Then Aaron took a road trip with some friends to Nashville, and something clicked. "I was in the car and I suddenly realized that Jesus made perfect sense. I realized that I needed to become a Christian. That was two years ago, and I don't ever want to stop."

Aaron says he has some issues with his family, but they are working through them. "My mom doesn't really know what her beliefs are now. She doesn't seem to want to talk about it. My grandparents are still orthodox. My grandmother said that a part of her died when I became a Christian. My grandfather mocked me at first, but I told them, 'I'm not into drugs or anything—I'm just trying to make myself better.'"

"Jesus makes sense to me. I am taking philosophy now at school and I am very interested in how it ties into Christianity. I've been reading St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, and much of what they wrote still rings true today."

Aaron is also reflecting on his roots. He is reading a lot of his grandfather's books about the Old Testament. "I am looking back on Judaism and it helps me to understand who I am more. It also helps me understand Jesus better."

In August 2003, Aaron returned to Philadelphia. He and his southern girlfriend broke up and he was ready to be closer to home. His ex-girlfriend heard about Circle of Hope through Aaron Weiss in the band Me Without You, and she suggested that Aaron check it out. "I visited Center City once and didn't really connect. I was used to going to a church

with a lot of older people."

One day he was on the train, and someone commented on a bracelet that Aaron was wearing. They chatted for a few minutes. It turns out that that person was Angel, who attends Circle East. Not long after that, Aaron saw Angel in the library at school and they spent more time talking. "I asked him where he went to church, and he told me Circle East. We decided to go there together." Aaron attended intermittently for a while, but he says he was struggling with God over submission and obedience. "I finally got past it, and in January I started to get more consistent with attending Circle."

Now Aaron is an apprentice cell leader to Jon Olshefski's cell. The cell meets at Aaron's house, and it is an eclectic group of Christians and non-believers. Aaron is getting baptized on the same day that he covenants with Circle of Hope at the end of April.

Christina Kallas

"A few long-time Christians have told me that they have experienced spiritual dryness. I hope I never go through that!" shared Christina Kallas. "This past year has been wonderful, and I do not want to lose it."

Christina used to be an atheist. Although she had grown up going to Sunday school and Bible camp, it didn't really sink in. As a teen, she was into art, literature and punk music. The people she admired didn't believe in God, and she started to feel the same. "I felt rebellious, and I thought religion was for weak people," she said.

Over the past ten years, she's worked for several HIV/AIDS organizations as Director of Volunteers. "In that setting I worked closely with the gay community, and I had problems with a few of the visible Christians. When 9/11 happened, Pat Robertson blamed the tragedy on things like gays and abortion. I saw a lot of judgment and hypocrisy within Christianity and didn't want any part of that."

Close to three years ago, Christina was dating a man who had been a Christian up until about 6 months before they met. While they were together, he had solidly left the faith. One night they went to Circle of Hope to see some of his old friends, and Christina remembers thinking that it didn't feel like a church. "But there was no

real meaning in it for me. I didn't hear it," she shared. Later, they visited another church, non denominational and once again she just didn't feel anything.

About a year ago, the relationship with her boyfriend had ended and soon after, her cat had died. "I felt sad and broken," she said. "I wanted to reach out to God. I knew he was there, but I fought it."

One night, Christina entered a Christian chat room. "I asked questions, and I baited people, mocking the immaculate conception and that type of thing. I still felt a draw, but I continued to fight it."

"Someone in the chat room said, 'Maybe you're searching too hard for something that is right in front of you.' I wanted to pray, but I didn't know how," she said. "Finally I just did it, I let go, and I talked to God. It was very overwhelming and I didn't understand."

But once she started praying, it felt right. "I tried to stop fighting it, and even though I still had questions, I put them on the back burner, so I could move forward. For a few months, I just prayed, just talked to God. I knew it was right."

"I am rediscovering things," she continued. "I prayed, surrendered, and now I hear and see things differently. I'm aware of myself and other people. I'm learning discernment."

Christina remembered how non-threatening Circle of Hope was, and she returned. "I cried at the songs—the words finally had meaning to me. Amazing Grace is fantastic! And I like Rod a lot, so it just clicked."

"It's been wonderful," she shared. "It's exciting and frustrating at the same time. I'm more aware of stuff now. I'm convicted. Sometimes I want to hide, but I can't. At times I fear maybe God doesn't love or want me. I know I just have to accept that He does and it's not going to change."

A lot of Christina's friends are not Christians, and when she told them about her new faith, they were extremely surprised. "Someone even said to me, 'that's interesting, I would have thought you'd go for Buddhism'," she said. "But they are very supportive, they ask questions, and we have good conversations."

Not everyone in her life was a non-believer. Christina's mother and a few of her friends had always been Christians, but they talked very little on the topic of faith. She has enjoyed connecting with

them on a new level. "I talk about my faith all the time now." Christina shared about a weekend visit with her friend Jackie who has been a Christian for a while. After the weekend, Jackie wrote a letter saying that she thanked God for Christina and her new faith. Jackie said that she felt like she was experiencing a new relationship with God now herself and she could see differences in her life and family as a result.

Christina is between jobs right now and she's leaning on God as she decides what is next. "God is not just a part of my life, He's everything," she shared. "I'm trying to let go as I figure out what will happen next. Maybe I'll go back to school. Whatever happens, I know they will be positive changes. I'm usually anxious about things like this, but I'm feeling really calm now. It feels good to lean on God."

Jane Clinton

Faith Building

Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see" (Hebrews 11:1). The Circle of Hope community has taken incredible steps of faith and seen many miracles. Three of the most recent miracles have come in the form of buildings. While this world is not our final resting place, we are looking for ways to deepen our roots and be on mission with Jesus in Philadelphia.

I asked a few Circle of Hope members to share their memories, joys and challenges, hopes and dreams, and how they have seen Jesus working through the process. Here are their stories.

2007 Frankford Avenue Circle East and Circle Thrift

Sarah Thompson – I drove around one afternoon with a list of different abandoned buildings, 2007 Frankford being one of them. I actually found a name and phone number for the owner, called him and told our story. The owner and his wife had been praying that God would use the building ever since they had moved the dental practice to the suburbs 12 years before. The owner bought the property in the early 1980's for \$50K and agreed to sell it to us for the same price, even as property values were skyrocketing around the building!

Martha Grace – Realizing that transforming a building using mainly volunteers was actually possible was great. Then realizing that using our people to volunteer on the building all the time was sucking some of the life out of our church was not so great. It was challenging to figure out the balance and budgeting of using volunteers as opposed to paid workers. We ended up doing both. I hope that while we are here the space can be useful to our neighborhood and that people coming through would feel the love we built it with.

Jeremy Avellino – I loved the challenge of turning the massive building from an abandoned shell of a structure into a thriving thrift store. It was amazing to have been handed a commission such as that as a young architect. The greatest joy was being a part of a crew that put its faith in God every day. Jesus met us face to face on the jobsite. I hope that we can continue to connect with the surrounding community and deepen/widen our relationships with people. I dream for the store to generate revenue that supports the mission that's been driving the work from the beginning.

4617 Woodland Circle Counseling

Rod White – We had been looking for a little while, dreaming about the future of Circle Counseling, which had outgrown the 239 S. 10th space and had no room for the future. We thought 4627 was an amazing deal, though a daunting project. We took optimistic advice about what it would take to rehab the place and ended up with way too much time and money invested -- about double what we thought we would need. Jesus has rescued me from a "breakdown" several times. One time -- when we were at the depths of despair and did not know how we would ever get this done, the contractor from across the street, Wynwright Lawsin, came over to see what we were doing. He offered a lot of free help and advice, and then gave us a good price on taking over the top two floors and getting it all over with.

The Circle Counseling building will provide a space for people to receive reasonably priced, high-quality psychotherapy, which is very difficult for regular people to get. It loosens up one's

spirit to receive the grace of God, it unleashes love and truth. I think we will eventually have some great seminars there, and train some great therapists.

Paul Kohl - Rod and Gwen showed me the building after they bought it. I remember thinking how much faith they had to select it. I want Circle Counseling to help mend broken people. I want goodness to flow in Philly, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life" (Psalm 23). Some of this has already happened through the process of rehabbing the building. The conflict, disappointments, and success many of us had with each other, the city and general life has already helped us be a more authentic community.

1125 S. Broad Circle of Hope Center City's new mission center

Jane Clinton - We have been talking and praying about a new building for the Center City congregation for longer than I remember. The place at Broad and Washington is a true miracle. The space is big and gives us a clean slate to create a new home. The price is amazing. I have seen Jesus at work through the whole process - from people finding time to make phone calls and visit buildings, to 20 minute meetings where we came to agreement on the next steps. I see us growing into and then out of this new building, and hiving off the next Circle of Hope from the fruit of our labor.

Ty Furman - I was just amazed to find something so similar to what we have, but bigger. It is flexible, with so many possibilities. I hope for all kinds of art to be expressed in our new space. I see Jesus moving through the miracle of finding a space that we can afford and have room to grow. It is an affirmation that this community must continue, that we belong in the city and that there is still work to be done.

While writing this article, it became clear to me that we must remember that these buildings are tools, not the essence of what Jesus is calling Circle of Hope to do and be. Martha Grace said it well, "I want us to use the building to its fullest potential while we have it. My hope is that we will not be so attached

(Continued on page 5)

to it, just because we built it together, that we couldn't move with God."

These stories give us reason to hope, pray, and act. *"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.* (Philippians 4:4-7)

Juanita Nyce

What's more...5619 Germantown Ave. Just as Juanita was finishing her article, Bryan Robinson was sealing a deal with a charter school to share our much-loved space at Germantown and Cheltenham. We have been looking for a flexible partner for a long time to keep us out of the hole, financially, since the building has always been too large for us. We seem to have done it! Another "Yes!" to our prayers. — Ed.

Why Circle of Hope Needs Miracles

There isn't much to Circle of Hope if there isn't a miracle — and that is the way it should be. As a matter of fact, when God drew a few people together to form this new rendition of his church, we deliberately tried to install "fail safe devices" that would guarantee that we needed God's presence to survive — we hoped the church would self-destruct if it was not motivated by the Spirit; we wanted it to die if love didn't move it; we plotted for it to collapse into an appropriate heap of trash if it didn't require God to do what it was doing. Don't you still feel like that's the way it should be? There is nothing worse than a church that can cruise along fine without the presence of Jesus!

Or do you think I'm sounding grandiose? Maybe you'd like it admitted that, like in most groups of almost anyone, a good 75% of us are probably "conservative," meaning many of us like preserving and protecting what is, not necessarily moving on to what is next. "Relying on God's presence to survive"

could seem a little over-the-top! Destroying the church because it is not as wild as Jesus could seem a bit extreme! Even *talking* about miracles may seem grandiose.

It's true, the natural pull on any group, including our church, is to "nest," to settle, to collect in a comfortable warm pool of stagnating water at the lowest point in the landscape. The fiery passion and vision that creates a new church (like it created the first one) can be contained by the damp matches that are drawn to its warmth. To some, our "big bang" seems surrounded by a "stratosphere" of semi-interested people who don't practically care if Jesus lives or dies and who play an energy-sucking tug-of-war with God's gravity. So some days it may not seem like we are really so motivated by the Spirit, moved by love or even noticing God much at all.

Nevertheless, it is a miracle we got going and it is a miracle we survive. I don't think we would be anything to point at whatsoever unless God kept saying, "Let there be light" and he turned the lights on in our house. There would be no "damp matches" to talk about unless there were lit ones to compare them to. I think we have many more "big bangin'" people than our share, actually.

It is always hard to be a Christian. To be one requires God. To be the kind of Jesus followers we have been called to be *especially* requires God's miraculous touch. It is very challenging! Just look at the four characteristics we embody, named below. God has drawn us to be people with those characteristics. We are called to live in the radical heartland of his kingdom. To live there, we need God's touch to keep making us alive. We need a regular miracle to be the body *dba* Circle of Hope.

We need miracles because we expect to live in community

We want to live in love like we're encouraged to live in Ephesians 5: *Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*

We have had numerous little households, a few larger communities and a few marriages all break up among us over the years. We have had literally thousands of people visit our meetings and never "stick." We have deeply failed

in overcoming our culture's tendency to keep some distance for fear of losing independence.

But we have often succeeded, too. That's a miracle. The other day a young woman complained to me that it was much easier for her to make new acquaintances in a bar than in a church. "Why is it so different?" she asked. I told her that assuming Christians were too stuck up to go to bars probably wasn't all there was to it. It might have more to do with the fact that bars are anonymous (until you become one of the regulars) and churches are communities of love. A bar's community can form spontaneously and last until the drinks are consumed. We are eternal and our love is weighty. You'd have to be very drunk not to see that. So a person becoming acquainted with us will see it. To make a connection that weighty and keep it, takes a miracle. It takes a work of God in us to love like Jesus and to offer ourselves for others.

We need miracles because we rely on everyone's personal initiative.

If people do not respond to the Spirit's prompting, we're dead. Because all we are is a collection of whatever the Spirit of God expresses through us, just like we are described in 1 Corinthians 12: *There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all [people]. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.*

It might be easier to recruit star power leaders and hold big events that transcend our humanity. But we are determined that regular people, filled with God's Spirit will operate our "vehicle." So some seasons we have sat in the garage until our tires went flat and other times inexperienced drivers have roared right out into the street and had a crash.

But aren't you amazed that in ten years we have had the initiative among us to build three congregations nearing 400 people, thirty-four cells (68 leaders), fifteen mission teams, Circle Venture, Circle Counseling, Circle Thrift, and more? That's a miracle.

The other day the Cell Leader Coordinators were noting that several of the cells are somewhat tormented by people who have "relapsed" you might say, into self-absorption. Or worse, they have decided that our ways and our love aren't good

enough for them, after years of caring, so they are pulling up stakes and moving on to greener pastures. They are kind of the “anti-matter” of spiritual motivation. They suck the life out of you. To keep trying in the face of that takes the “manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” It takes a miracle to keep saying, “Send me,” to God and to mean it.

We need miracles because we are called to keep searching for what is next

We are on a journey together. We are followers. We are driven by the strategy of God’s always-adapting redemption project, like Paul describes himself to the Philippians in chapter three: *“I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ...I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us who are mature should take such a view of things.”*

To some, our “big bang” seems surrounded by a “stratosphere” of semi-interested people who don’t practically care if Jesus lives or dies and who play an energy-sucking tug-of-war with God’s gravity. ...Nevertheless, it is a miracle we got going and it is a miracle we survive.

One does not have to be incredibly frank to immediately note that many of us are barely secure in what “is,” much less enrapt with what is “next.” Sometimes it is hard to tell if we are converting what is coming next or being converted by it! We like to think of ourselves as the next generation of the church, but many of us are a little too unsure about what is going on right now to press on too much.

But you just have to attend one of the love feasts in the past year to think we just might make it after all. I never tire of hearing the stories of people who have been taken hold of by God and changed. It is a miracle again and again. People have been coming out of families dead set against Jesus, out of homelessness and addiction, out of tepid and self-serving Christianity.

Not quite as public but still quite as amazing are those meetings we hold every year to discern our map for the next part of our journey together. We ask the cells what God wants to do next, then we decide together to do what we agree to do, and then we do it!. That’s a miracle year after year. We have an anarchic, or-

ganic process that breeds concrete results by God’s power.

Periodically, I talk to a believer who comes from what I’d say is “what was” and they look over Circle of Hope and assess what is going on (as church people are wont to do). “Why aren’t you bigger? Why aren’t you better?” they ask. Sometimes I feel embarrassed. But more often I remember to respond – “Hey, it is a miracle we are anything! We are just us, pressing on, just regular people doing all we can do. We’re just trying to keep up with what God is doing next”

We need miracles because we make countercultural moves that require God’s power

We are not like everyone else and we admit it. We even speak to the domination system like the first followers did in Acts 5: *“We must obey God rather than men! The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead--whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”*

It is true that we have all the arguments of our culture happening among us, so it might seem like an overstatement to say we are countercultural at all. Some of us want to be free by letting everything in – they fear obedience. We have our share of catastrophic sexual misadventures, for instance, just like people around us. On the other hand some of us want to stay free by keeping everything out – they obey their fears. We have our share of judgmental attitudes, just like people around us. We can sound downright blue state/red state! And if we are really honest, we have to admit that most of us have a hard time making a decision that goes against financial security, resume fulfillment or sexual/relational connection, just like the unbelievers.

Yet, it is amazing how against the grain we can keep on growing. It is a

miracle. We say to neighborhoods that are inhospitable to Jesus, “We will plant a new congregation in you.” We say to racism and irreconciliation, “We are going to look just like the kingdom of God, or die trying, even if it does irritate us all!”

When we say “No!” to the powers that foment violence around the world or on the street, who trust in brute force and punitive measures, it causes relational problems among us; it gets us tagged “liberal.” It’s a miracle we dare. When we say “No!” to the “tolerance” loving “god” who supposedly brings all the “faiths” together it causes relational problems among us and tags us “conservative.” It’s a miracle that we risk it. In our cell last week we started talking about how the Holy Spirit guides us, and most of us thought that sounded like some radical Christianity was going on! It takes a miracle to not just slide into self-destruction on the slippery slope of what is going down, doesn’t it?

I hope God gives me the courage, if it is ever needed, to pull the switch that blows us up if we ever get to the place where it does not take a miracle for us to survive as the church. And I hope you beat me to the switch!

May God always triumph over the doubt and cynicism that questions whether the Spirit can motivate us. May God prevail over the broken relationships and sinful interactions that threaten to block the movement of love. May God always overcome the apathy and ignorance that gum up the recognition that God is at work.

Rod White

Answered Prayer

Chris has been collecting stories from people about how God responded when they called on him, like Jesus encouraged us to do: *“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. “Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! Matthew 7:7-11 — ED.*

(Continued on page 7)

A story from Ben White...

While in Mexico with the Mennonite Central Committee I had the opportunity to be a part of an Anabaptist community called Pueblo en Transformación (People in Transformation), and as a result of that connection I have been transformed in many ways. One way is my reliance on miracles and my ability to believe them. The first Sunday I worshiped at P.E.T. a young man stood up and shared his frustration and pain relating to his kidney disease. The next day I went to the hospital to visit him as he underwent a series of tests. It was an awkward first encounter as I had to go up to his room alone due to hospital regulations. Also, I had just arrived in Mexico and my Spanish was still lacking. Erick Manuel Baraiza Vera became a close friend of mine and I learned about all the incredible things he had to give for the Kingdom of God. He was incredibly intelligent and an excellent organizer. He had already been a benefit to the church community, and was sure to only become more so as he grew into an older, more trained and more matured believer. But his disease persisted and it seemed that his condition worsened with each monthly test. Months after that first Sunday Erick took the spotlight again during worship. We had planned a special prayer time for Erick and the Baraiza Vera family, which included his father, Eugenio, his mother, Veronica, and his sister, Citlali. We circled around them to pray and as we laid our hands on them we formed a powerful web of believers. The pastor, Ofelia Garcia de Pedroza, anointed Erick with oil and as she did I felt a strong urge to open my eyes and watch her do it. I had my hand firmly placed on Eugenio's shoulder but when I looked to Erick I felt that I needed to touch him and that maybe, just maybe there could be spiritual power in my oddly throbbing hand. The experience was new and unfamiliar. I did not know what to think, but I prayed fervently through the week that Erick went in for his test. On the following Sunday we heard the news: the indicator of kidney function in the doctor's tests, the level of protein in Erick's urine, had gone down three hundred percent. The doctor's had found a new experimental drug that had saved Erick from going on the list for kidney transplants. We praised the Lord. All that week I had prayed the Father's prayer from Mark 9,

"Lord, I believe, help my unbelief." And He certainly did. Erick now attends the Mexican National Autonomous University and he can regulate his disorder by diet alone. Thank you Jesus, Amen.

A story from Aubrey White...

From the start, his name was a joke. We needed a "P" name and I thought that it would be funny to name our scrawny little kitten after one of the great orators of ancient Athens. So he became Pericles and greatness has never looked so pathetic. Sometimes, for short, I call him Perky, but this is even worse because he's even less perky than he is great. My Pericles has always been sick. Congestion is the general rule with him and cleaning his nose has become a daily ritual like cleaning his litter box. When he got the flu, he sat still for a week and refused to eat. When he got scratched in the eye, instead of healing like normal cats, he actually lost his cornea and we had to wait for it to grow back. He's weak. A loser. A pathetic example of a cat. And I love him.

Pericles shows me how it can be that God loves us at our ugliest. I figure that if I can love him when he's so utterly unlovable then it's conceivable that God loves me when I'm unlovable. It's conceivable that weakness doesn't end in failure but rather in love. This living picture usually helps me. Palm Sunday it felt more like a trap. We were at the vet's office, ready to let go and to put our little hero down, ending his latest bout with sickness. He had been having trouble urinating, eating, and drinking, so the vet had taken blood tests. The results were in and the vet was honest that even with hospital care, the prognosis was "guarded." The tests showed that his kidneys were not functioning at all: a normal level of creatinine in a cat is under 2.5; Pericles' level was 15. Later the vet was to tell me that these numbers were "not compatible with life." In light of this we decided it was time for him to die. The vet encouraged us to test his blood again just to see if the medicine has done anything in the last 36 hours. She was looking for any movement in his levels at all. I was just looking for closure. If the levels hadn't moved, then I wouldn't even feel guilty about my choice because then I would know more care wouldn't have helped anyway. While we waited for the new results, I prayed

about handling the loss of my cat and of my picture of weakness and love. I didn't even think to pray for God to heal him. To be honest, I didn't think that God would care too much about healing him. I just felt confused: now weakness was not ending in love - it was ending in death.

Thirty minutes passed and then the vet's shocked face reappeared. New test results showed that his levels had, indeed, moved. His creatinine reading was 2.0! His blood tests showed a normal, healthy cat. There was no explanation for this. Even if his kidneys were bouncing back from poisoning, they should have taken longer than the 36 hours he had between tests. The vet didn't even know what to say. I didn't either. I didn't really think that this was a big enough deal for God to care about. I cared about it, surely, but why would God care? But He must have cared. Jesus must have meant it when he said that God notices sparrows. He certainly noticed my cat. There was no explanation other than that Pericles had been healed. Within days he began eating, drinking, and using his litter box normally. By Easter he had returned to his regular annoying position directly behind my head on the couch. Pericles was still weak, but he was alive. His weakness (my weakness? Jesus' weakness?) did not end in death. This Easter the cat Pericles joined the resurrection stage. Not great. Not perky. Just loved and healed. If God cares for him, how much more must he care for all of us?

Chris Puchalsky

Goal Check

(Continued from page 8)

Help the Network develop more and deeper relationships with partners in the rest of the Church

We have made connections with Manheim BIC (with the Farm Team and Circle Thrift). Pray for God to call out dedicated networkers.

Sponsor the tsunami rebuilding project in February and March

Finished! We gave almost \$2000 over our normal MCC giving.

Goal Check *Feb.-Apr. 2005*

This is a regular feature of this publication. We want everyone to have some facts so we can have authentic dialogue! We adopted these goals in January of 2005. Every quarter we evaluate our progress toward meeting them.

Network

Encourage our focus on racial reconciliation

Center City's Damascus Road Team sponsored DR Training Part 2. We have held four Hours for Reconciliation.

Create a secure environment for making disciples

The Pastor Team continued to refine how they work together. We reorganized the Common Fund to allow for more hands-on strategy in the NW. We created a more flexible Compassion Fund account.

Increase the number of Cells and Cell Leaders by at least 50%

We had 24 cells at the end of December. We have 34 now.

Prepare to plant another congregation in two years

We continue to grow in number, overall.

Broad and Washington

Experience a change in how we engage in our main mission

We held a final arts opening at 239 S. Tenth. Our move has rejuvenated many.

Deepen our reliance on miracles

People have been praying and receiving "the impossible." We have ventured into areas that require God to succeed.

Deal with our eviction

We signed a lease at 1125 S. Broad, made rehab plans, began demolition, moved into temporary quarters on the first floor.

Diversify racially and otherwise

The Damascus Road Team kept us focused.

Care for children in more deliberate, creative ways

Our AM PM has been a good addition.

Unleash our gifted teachers in new ways

We asked gifted women to lead us in hearing "women's voices."

Support Circle Counseling as it begins its next era

Circle Counseling moved to 4617 Woodland Ave.

Northwest

Continue to develop our public meeting so that it reflects the diverse community served.

This continues.

Find new ways to connect with and serve youth and families

Brenda Robinson recently received more freedom to help through becoming an MCC Local Service Worker. Calvin Skinner will be a Summer Service Worker with MCC this summer.

Commit to actively addressing social issues in surrounding community

Sponsoring the Safe Streets initiative was a great success. Several people have found jobs and homes recently through our work.

Promote church growth

This is happening. There are over 70 regular attenders, now.

East

Raise up cells with a mission: places for discipling those already connected as well as for connecting with people beyond our normal boundaries

New cells are being formed with people who are disconnected from Jesus and the church—meeting from people's homes to bars to Temple's campus!

New cell meetings have begun in new neighborhoods (North Philly, Kensington @ Allegheny), as well at a South Phila bar and Temple students.

Find ways to connect with the next generation, indigenous to the Kensington/Fishtown/Northern Liberties areas

Not a lot of progress here.

Actively participate in the work of racial reconciliation and dismantling systemic racism (personally, congregationally, as a network, and globally)

We have been participating as a network in the Hours for Reconciliation. More relational work in progress.

Continue to grow and develop diverse PMs

We hope God to keep calling out more partners to build more bridges for different kinds of people.

Circle Venture

Engage our network people and offer regular and varied ways for them to be involved in expressing compassion.

The Water Team is planning to provide an insert to the church programs to discuss their findings and ideas. The Damascus Road Team is holding discussions about how to keep our mission teams representative of the network and not a particular congregation. More volunteers from the network are working at Circle Thrift.

Raise \$30,000.

The Books of Love team held two dinner fundraisers and raised about \$2,000 toward its second shipment of books. The Farm Team is trying to obtain donations from Home Depot for a small garden.

Hurl stones at three select "Goliaths": healthy drinking water, Philadelphia's education needs and racial reconciliation.

The Water Team is continuing to try to raise money for additional wells in third-world countries. The Community Education Team is trying to learn what specific areas of education are needed in the Kensington area. This team is currently running baby good swaps on a regular basis. The Damascus Road Team completed its second training and is meeting regularly to plan ways to implement racial understanding in Philadelphia.

Return Circle Venture Leadership Team to its roots and provide more opportunity for mission teams to participate in decision-making.

The Leadership Team met as a whole in March and we are moving forward as a cohesive team. The officers continue to meet monthly.

Include administrative duties previously performed by Circle Venture Director in a new Network administrator position.

The Coordinators decided not to hire a person in this position so Circle Venture is considering hiring someone as a part-time fundraiser. This will be decided at the May officers meeting.

(Continued on page 7)