Women's

PERSPECTIVES

Beginnings in ministry . . . sharing and growing in faith

By Janet Ryu-Chan

The theme of this issue is Recent Graduates from Knox College and the writers range in age, life experience, family history, ethnicity, hermeunetics and the list goes on. What connects us (the writers) to you (the reader) and you to us is our relationship to our loving Creator and our shared humanity created in the divine image. In having the privilege of helping to put this issue together, my prayer is that some of these articles or a phrase or two from one of them or even a word or an image might fall into the fertile soil of our souls and take root or bring much needed water or sunshine onto the green shoots of our faith. In this way our understanding of the sacred and the divine will grow as our relationships with Christ deepen and in turn transform us to be more Christ-like in how we love God and one another through and in the power of God's grace.

Janet Ryu-Chan graduated from Knox in the spring of 2005. She cherishes the privilege of journeying with people as a spiritual companion. Having returned to school very part-time to explore Spiritual Direction at Regis College, she looks forward to growing in faith and sharing what she has learned.

In This Issue...

November 2009
Issue 74

Beginnings in ministry . . . sharing and growing in faith — p. 1
by Janet Ryu-Chan

Immanuel — p. 2
by Janet Ryu-Chan

And Jesus went into the mountains . . . — p. 5
by Amanda Birchall

Ten Things I Wish Someone had Told me When I Started this Gig . . . — p. 6
by Rebekah Mitchell

The Hours – Solitary Reflections from a Convent — p.8
by Vivian Carter

By Janet Ryu-Chan

I have looked for the sacred in the drudgery of my life.
But in picking up the hundredth piece of lego for the day
and putting in the fourth load of laundry,
I struggle to limit the resentment that begins to well up inside of me
over the never-ending nature of tidying and washing.

During the hour and a half it takes me to clean the kitchen, start and finish dinner,
I juggle loading the dryer, putting in another load of laundry, helping with
homework and thinking about work – Sunday service, who needs a call,
material I'm going to cover for premarital counseling, what to put on
the agenda for session and more
all at the same time.

In the busyness of doing, the exhausting reality of work and family,
a glimpse of beauty or something wondrous
would be like a drop of rain on parched land.
Touching, tasting, hearing, seeing or smelling what is holy
would be like time
s l o w i n g
down for a moment.

As utter weariness consumes my being,
I hope that my search for the sacred will be
effortless and easy.

Ever so painfully,
I realize that I have to expend more energy
in order to experience
what it is
that makes
life
mysterious
mystical
and
full of divine love.

Sometimes, taking the time to be still feels like I'm expending more energy. I have to concentrate so hard in quieting my mind in order *not* to think about what I have to do or *not* to worry about forgetting a deadline or a meeting. I'm so used to trying to keep everything in my brain and so petrified of letting it go – especially as I've been guilty of double-booking myself and standing people up – that 'being still' can take an extraordinary amount of will power and intentionality.

In my teens and early twenties my memory used to be quite good and my extroverted nature dreaded any kind of silence resulting from the absence of motion or conversation. Pre-kids, my memory was so good that if I may boast, I rarely, if ever, told the same story to the same person more than once. Now, I find myself doing this on a pretty regular basis and it is a blow to my pride – one of the seven deadly sins that is a constant thorn in my flesh. I also loved being surrounded by a bunch of friends and the buzz of endless chatter, pre-kids that is.

But having children, a husband and a full-time position in ministry changes things. My memory is not as sharp as it once was and I crave silence – but not necessarily the kind of silence that deepens the intimacy between me and my Creator because 'being still' is different from craving silence.

I have struggled to be still – to be in the now, to be in the present moment – and to experience the I AM that I AM. In some strange, masochistic and crazy way, it seems easier to run around like a chicken with its head cut off (not a very post-modern simile as the majority of us have never seen this image) trying to fulfill everyone's expectations except God's gentle, persistent and loving call. Granted, sometimes God's call is not so gentle but however the call comes, I am often terrified by it. How will answering the call change what is familiar? What is the cost of answering the call? What will people think if I answer this call?

And when you are a perfectionist like me . . .

When your sense of self-worth comes from doing well . . .

and according to the measurable standards of the North American context that even the most well-meaning of churches unwittingly succumb to. . .

Being still and knowing that God is God is vital to sanity, never mind this seemingly elusive concept of wholeness, well-being and inner peace.

But how does one be still, especially when one's sink is so full that one can't even stick one's cup under the faucet to get a cup of water?

To drink from the transcendental well
that quenches thirst like no other,
I need to find it as it changes
feel, flavour, sound, shape and fragrance
from place to person to moment in time.
And so . . .
When I look for the well intentionally,
When I take the time to
s l o w
down and be in the
moment,
When I stop wishing that my circumstances were different,
When I use all my senses,
I sip in the sacred
and my soul sings. [1]

There is something cathartic about rinsing off the dirty plates before putting them in the dishwater.
There is something in the slowing down of doing this mundane chore instead of frantically trying to race through it before beginning the next.
There is something in the repetitive motion that causes my mind to still.
And in the stillness,
God's truth pierces me;
God's peace rests upon me;
God's love comforts me;
God's wisdom visits me;
God's strength strengthens me:
God's call calls to me
and . . .
I am.

Be still and know that I am God. Ps. 46:10

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[1]The following poem Immanuel was first published in the first edition of the theological literary art journal entitled, SmoKe and SaLt: Lyrical Art and Dappled Shadows.

And Jesus went into the mountains . . .

By Amanda Birchall

When other colleagues ask me about my experience in rural ministry, they usually ask me when I plan on moving to a bigger church. There is a perception among clergy that rural ministry is where you might begin but it is not where you stay. I was ordained in 2002 and have served the same small rural two-point charge in southwestern Ontario for the last seven years. Rural ministry is diverse and challenging, and in The Presbyterian Church in Canada, a good number of our churches are considered small town or rural. It is a privilege to serve Christ in these communities. It is a challenge to offer vital and vibrant ministry anywhere in Canada, and I commend my fellow women in ministry for their tireless efforts in doing so wherever God has called them.

When I graduated from Knox College in 2002, I had already completed an eight month internship in a rural farming community near Lake Huron which taught me that rural ministry is centred on church as a family. As much as program ministry is desired by the church, for ministries such as youth group and Bible studies, the focus of ministry is on vibrant weekly worship, fellowship and pastoral care. Taking that teaching as a key focus in my own ministry, I pushed that model, spending a lot of time on leadership development with the elders. My goal was to ensure that the ministry we did as a session, or church, was centred on, and motivated by biblical principles (worship, fellowship, evangelism, service and discipleship). Each year we take one of those principles as a specific focus for our ministry. As the minister, you often become more of a coach in rural ministry, with the elders all working together on each project we conduct. The year we centred on fellowship was very well received. We asked each group in the church to host a fellowship event for community that would uniquely raise money to buy livestock for families sponsored by Presbyterian World Service and Development.

The challenges in rural ministry are many. One such challenge is that as a rural minister you are isolated geographically from other ministers and from city centers that would afford you more diverse opportunities to meet people and create community outside the church. I belong to a group of rural ministers who meet monthly for bible study, prayer and book study, which helps me to share ideas and find encouragement.

Rural poverty is a very prevalent challenge and helping single parent families find the right resources for social services and counseling can involve a lot of time. The churches I serve work in the breakfast program at the local public school and we support the Back Pack Project, helping identified families have all that their children need to start school with the right supplies.

Another challenge is that I work from home, since there is no office space or phone line in either church. I quickly learned to be very diligent about my work hours, and created a good, bright office space where I am motivated to work.

As a leader in rural ministry, I have found that respect is earned, not given. I am humbled by the respect I am given as a minister in this community as well as by my own churches. Working with men and women 30 years my senior, or more in most cases, I appreciate all the trust they have in my ability to offer ministry with integrity and purpose in the name of Christ our Saviour.

I would encourage anyone to enter rural ministry, not as a stepping stone to something bigger, or seemingly better, but to take joy in God's calling, and to offer the best that you have to the people God invites you to know and love in God's name.

Amanda Birchall graduated in 2001and has ministered to the congregations of Appin and Guthrie Presbyterian Churches in southwestern Ontario for the last 7 years.

Ten Things I Wish Someone had Told me When I Started this Gig . . .

By Rebekah Mitchell

1. Prayer

I know you've heard this before – but there's nothing as important as prayer. We do a good job of talking that talk in seminary, in lay leadership, in Bible Study, but when you're in full-time ministry it is very important to walk the walk. Find a prayer warrior in your congregation. Chances are it will take you a little while to figure out who this person is, and that's okay, but once you do – start praying with them regularly. Pray for the growth of the church, pray for congregational health, pray that Christ is powerfully preached, pray that the enemy is kept at bay by the undefeatable God of the Universe. Just pray. Find a colleague to pray with, as well. It could be that you will pray over the phone, it could be that you will start a prayer group in your Presbytery, it could be that you will pray with the Lutheran pastor down the street. Find someone who is also in full-time ministry, who will understand all the things you're going through, and spend time lifting each other up in prayer.

2. Sabbath

Rest time is important. Figure out the best day of the week for you to take a full 24 hrs away from everything, and then guard that time with everything you've got. Chances are there will be times that mess with your Sabbath day, but when that happens, take some other day off in the week. No matter what that little voice in your head says, you DO do enough. You DO work hard enough. You DO deserve your time off, and no one should mess with it. If you don't take it, you WILL find yourself burned out. That's just a fact. Jesus had this pattern – he would be among people, he would be working hard, and then he would go away for a while. He would take some quiet time. If it's good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for us.

3. Good Music

Find some music that uplifts you – could be Cold Play, could be your favourite Worship cd, could be classical – and turn to it when you're having a bad day or a bad moment during your day. When you lead worship for a living, you don't often get to worship. So figure out what music helps you worship and play it in the car or turn to it when you take a moment to make yourself a cup of coffee.

4. Coffee/Lunch with Colleagues

This is work. This is not goofing off with your friends. Make connections with other pastors and worship leaders, and do lunch or coffee regularly. You will talk about everything, and you will probably talk shop a lot. You will idea-share without even knowing you're doing it.

5. Kill the Super-Pastor

I totally stole that from Rob Bell's book, *Velvet Elvis*. In it, Bell talks about arriving at a moment in his ministry where it looked like everything was going right, but all he wanted to do was run away. That's because he was trying to be and do everything, and he knew he couldn't keep it up. His advice? Don't start being the "Super-Pastor." Be you. A friend of mine once said that it's best to be yourself in ministry because you are the person God called. That's really good advice. Be you. And trust that God knows what He's doing with you.

6. Don't Reinvent the Wheel

That last one, leads me to this one. I could have tried to figure out a better way to say in my own words what Rob Bell said. I could have tried to come up with something as clever as the "Super-Pastor" on my own. But

Ten Things I Wish Someone had Told me When I Started this Gig . . . cont.

why? It had already been said in a way that was interesting and intriguing and clear. One of my difficulties is that I often try to reinvent the wheel. Instead of simply using the excellent resources that are out there. Use resources; they will save you time and you'll learn something along the way.

7. Podcasts are Free

My high school creative writing teacher told my class to read good books. She said good writing inspires good writing. She said you'll become a better writer the more you read. I think the same thing applies to preaching. Good preaching inspires good preaching, and you'll become a better preacher the more sermons you listen to. That's tricky for a pastor because you probably don't have a lot of time to spend in church just being a worshipper. But there is good news – podcasts are free. You can listen to the best communicators on the planet for free. Every week. Go download iTunes and start subscribing today. Want some suggestions? Check out Erwin McManus at Mosaic LA, Rob Bell at Mars Hill, Andy Stanley at Northpoint Community Church, Andrew Allison and Liz Honeyford at St. Paul's Leaskdale. That should get you started. Then pick up others when you come across them. You'll be glad you did. (Oh, and make sure you take some time every week to actually LISTEN to the podcasts each week!)

8. Record Yourself

Yeah, that one hurts. It's awful to listen to yourself, but it's a great discipline. You can get a digital recorder on eBay for about $40. You'll learn how long you preach, what your verbal ticks are (we all have them), what your strengths are. You will have weeks that you thought your sermon was a piece of junk and upon listening to it, you'll discover it was pretty good after all. You'll figure out the things you need to work on, and you'll work on them. Plus, if you have a half-decent computer and a church website, you can upload them. Some of your congregants will be thankful for this on weeks that they couldn't be at worship.

9. Idea Share

Remember those resources I talked about? Some of the best ones are the minds and experiences of your fellow pastors. So idea-share with some of them. If you're thinking of starting a new ministry initiative, call up some colleagues and ask for their ideas and opinions. When you're putting together a sermon or a series of sermons, talk to your colleagues. They will have insights and suggestions and will spark your own creative juices.

10. Study Leave

In the PCC we are granted 2 weeks of Study Leave every year. TAKE THEM! This could be some of the most restorative, exciting times every year. But in order to make it so, you need to research the conferences that are going to work best for you. Make it count, every year. If you can, go with colleagues – a shared experience is always better. I have to admit, I can generally only afford to go to a conference for one of my weeks of Study Leave each year. I tend to use the other for self-directed reading. If you need to go that route, try to find someone to partner with. You can read the same books and talk about them afterwards...even if you aren't going on Study Leave at the exact same time.

Rebekah Mitchell graduated in 2006 and is currently ministering at St. Luke's Presbyterian church in Oshawa. She follows her own advice given in this article, and adds that when the going gets really tough, the tough buy new shoes!

The Hours — Solitary Reflections from a Convent

Photo Credit, Vivian Carter © 2008

By Vivian Carter BFA, M. Div

It is mid-winter; a cold cruel time indeed, but this day is different. This day, my body and mind is in retreat and my soul is in silence at an Anglican Convent that is situated North of Toronto.

Surprisingly, it is warm. I can hear the soothing sound of great round raindrops laughing on the lower rooftop. My modest little room in the Convent's Guest House has a name, 'St. Scholastica'. Out of her window I can see a low-lying fog floating just above the crushed ice snow pillows that lay like gifts around the pine trees. Everything looks as if I have passed deeply into the pages of a C.S. Lewis fairy-tale. I push up the window's sash so that I can be wrapped in this eerie Chinook sigh. The cold, dripping wet trees look as if black boiled wool mufflers are hugging them tightly. All living things hold their collective breath. The snow-salted ravine bowl is holding a yawn. An unseen force is holding up a cosmic hand holding the air's currents frozen still.

The Sister who is in charge of the guesthouse has just come to welcome me. What a beautiful voice she has; soft and even, like the chenille bedspread on my single sized cast-iron bed. She has electric white hair, cut very short. Her silver wire-rim glasses accentuate the high pink in her cheeks - cheeks that are dotted with tea-stained freckle dots. She has a royal blue cassock and a black cross that lands just above her waist. She explains to me all about prayer before supper and compline (night) prayers after.

4:20PM: I am reveling in the still calm. I look closely at the crocheted blanket that has been lovingly and artfully placed at the end of my small bed. The tension in the crocheted throw is relaxed. It is covered in fuzzy caterpillars of colour; golden butter yellow, ultraviolet periwinkle blue, marshmallow white, sky-blue crayon and bubblegum pink. Simplicity is serenity.

5:15AM: It is inky-dark and I am restless in my yawning white room. I've been up since 4:00AM. It is a whole half an hour before I can even have a shower! I am restless like crinkled cellophane. I can't get settled. I can't get comfortable but I must be sure not to make any sound. I try the bed. Hey, did the bed squeak before?! And I'm convinced that it isn't as soft as it was when I first arrived. My head, races. I reject the desk - too small, and the chair - too hard. I feel a little like Goldilocks. I want to sleep, but my soul will have none of it. I have a lemon slice that I brought back from the pantry so that I could have some hot lemon water, but now the half moon just sits waterlogged at the bottom of my tea cup. Its tart taste felt righteous when I swallowed before sleep but now it tears at my esophagus leaving me with corrosive indigestion.

Noon: Eucharist prayers float like bubbles breaking the surface as if from a deep still pond. Some Sisters whisper their prayers, separately. At times, their invocations come tumbling over one another like water over river rocks. I, being the bloodless Presbyterian Protestant that I was trained to be (eschewing all forms of fire and incense, gold and embroidery, responsive hourly prayer), have no inkling what is to happen next in the service. Thankfully, the celebrant leads everyone through the liturgy as if we were all strangers in a stranger land.

It comes time in the service for sharing the sacred Elements of bread and wine. I follow the undulating line of physically challenged and elderly women up towards the stone railing. A leather pad welcomes arthritic knees. A constrained carved ledge gives rest to gnarled hands. We present ourselves at different heights – standing,

The Hours — Solitary Reflections from a Convent cont.

kneeling, sinking, ascending, sinking…different postures, different living prayers. We are a beatific bar graph at the front of the chapel.

It is an elderly female priest who presides at the 'First' Supper. The large Host wafer is held high above her silver-wool haired head. The wafer is not exactly soft and not exactly hard, either. It has an equilateral Greek Cross pressed into its centre. The priest has glacial clear eyes that dart over the assembly. Her moss green chasuble robe has an "A" wide embroidered tape of white, gold, green and yellow sparkling on it. She glides towards me snapping a piece of this Sacred starch just before she meets my eyes. I look up and meet her gaze. She appears startled. Why? I don't know. Am I not supposed to look at her?! I panic a bit. I'm doing this all wrong I chastise myself.

I look to my left and see a nun dressed in her black-ashes habit, the sort of token dress that you invariably see in movies or cartoons. Black wool scarf, white headband to just above the eyebrows, cloth covering her sloped shoulders - long and black - she wears a formless tent of worsted wool hovering just above her oxford laced shoes. She is beautiful, but not what the world's conventional sense of beauty is. Rather she radiates a kind of golden warmth, which shimmers all around her. As she kneels, her body rests in the shape of a lower-case 'r'. She offers up her twisted twig fingers (knotted and petrified by arthritic aggression). Her fingers are frozen in a permanent state of grace. As she waits for the Christ to be placed in her bird's nest of digits, I feel a profound sense of awe. There is a mystical suspension of space and time.

I have little more than a second, or two, to fully experience this transcendent moment when the cup arrives. Oh, NO!! I scream inside my head! I've eaten the Host! What am I going to dip into the chalice?!! Ack! The look of cell-splitting terror registers on my face as the priest stands in front of me. My blood pours out of my face as the office (literally) lifts grace before me.

I look tentatively into the silvered grail proxy. The Galilean Sea of liquid forgiveness did not reintroduce me to the 'vera icon' at that moment. All that looked back at me was my own fear reflected and distorted like a carnival sideshow fun mirror in this gold-lined goblet. My startled eyes stretched unnaturally wide. My nose flattened and my lips disappeared under the curve of the bowl. The Reverend Mother motions for me to lift the mirror of my soul, and to drink (it was either that or for the first time in my life I would have had half of communion!)

I look down into the gilded cave where the swirling sweet white wine winks back at me. The warm light above me - and my own ruddy complexion - reflects back to me an unfamiliar image of myself in the rocking liquid.

Here am I.

In that moment - held within the whisper of winter - I found myself drinking the blazing summer's sun.

Vivian Carter BFA, M. Div. graduated from Knox in 2001. Having discerned a call to express Christ consciousness and spirituality through the fine arts, she is the publisher/editor of a theological literary art journal. She also leads creative workshops encouraging individuals to explore spirituality and grow in faith. Her prayer is that you "Experience awe. Find your voice. Take risks. Bring love, be brave, ask questions and be you."

Women's Perspectives (WP) strives to keep women in touch with each other and share their theological perspectives, biblical insights, special interests, joys and concerns with the whole church. WP is published 6 times yearly. It is written by guest editors and overseen by WP Committee, in co-operation with the Women in Ministry Committee.

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Readers comments and contributions are welcome at womensperspectives@presbyterian.ca

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Editorial Committee: Judee Archer Green, Joan Homewood, Sheila Lang (administrator), Pat Martin (layout), Fairlie Ritchie, Maureen Walter