

Young Women in the Spirit

Editorial



Several years ago I had the opportunity to go to North Carolina for a couple of summers to work at a place called the Montreat Conference Center, in the Blue Ridge Mountains in North Carolina. As a young woman, and student I was prepared to go and work hard, long hours, different shifts, and in a place far from my family and friends. What I wasn't prepared for was the incredible amount of learning I would do.

In the two summers that I served as Conference Support staff in Montreat I learned about aspects of my faith - both as a Christian, and a Presbyterian - that I had not

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considered before. That as a young woman I had as much to offer our church as any other member of a congregation. I reflected on my gifts, and how I could use them to better serve my own church community. I entered into lively discussions, bible studies complete with great debates, and worshipped in a place where I could truly encounter God. I had the opportunity to hear and be encouraged by great speakers like Walter Bruggerman, and Anne Graham Lotz. I learned from my newfound friends and co-workers how to live and work in a Christian community, and in a house in the mountains called Sylvan Lodge I became a stronger, smarter Christian - and a more passionate young woman than I had been before.

When I was approached to be the guest editor for an edition of Women's Perspectives I was both intrigued and honoured. I had the chance to look over some of the previous editions, read the articles written by perceptive, intelligent women and men in our church, and I considered it to be a great opportunity to reflect on a topic that is actually quite dear to me: Young Women in the Spirit.

Often we think about the young people in the church. What are our "youth and young adults" doing? For me, that has been a question I've been happy to answer for some time.

I served on the executive of the Presbyterian Young People's Society (PYPS) of the CNOB Synod for 10 years. I can say with absolutely certainty that our young people are moving, working, and ministering to their peers and others in this church. But what about the young women?

At 25 years of age I certainly still consider myself one of the young women in our church - and my brief foray into editing has opened my eyes further to what our young women are doing. One of our contributors - Lindsey Nigra - has served PYPS, worked on planning and leading at Canada Youth 2006 and gone on a mission trip with Youth in Mission. She is just one example of many young women in our church who are moving and leading with fervor and passion for ministry both to their peers as well as to our wider church communities.

The recurring theme in this issue clearly came to be

encouragement. Our writers are 3 young women in different times and walks of their young lives; and yet - they all state the same thing: they are active in our church because they have been encouraged to be so. What a testament to the ministry happening within our own congregations! As you read through these articles, please ask yourself a question: whom are the young women moving in the spirit in my life, and how can I encourage them to continue? Because if it weren't for you and others in our churches, perhaps they wouldn't be writing these articles... and perhaps - neither would I.



Patricia Browne is a member of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Whitby, a University of Toronto graduate and has worked for the WMS Book Room for 2 1/2 years. She is looking forward to her next great adventure arriving mid-June when she becomes a Mom for the first time!

Editorial Note: Contributions were also solicited from two other "young women in the spirit"; Zahra Brown and Alison Lang, whose articles have been included in this issue.

By Heather Semotiuk

I've heard time and time again that the Presbyterian Church is growing older, growing smaller, and growing exclusive. I've been told there just isn't a place for youth anymore. Today's youth feel excluded, left behind, and unable to contribute to their congregation. I am glad that I can say that I am not one of them.

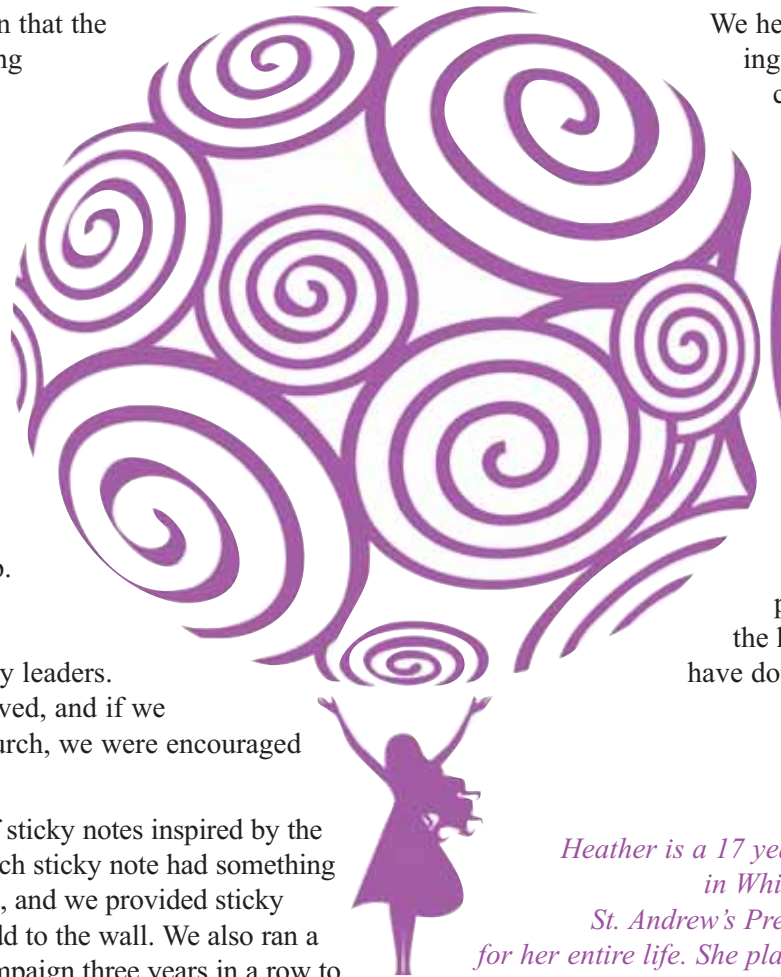
Since I was in grade six, I have been actively involved with my church's youth group. Recently re-named X-treme Life, the group has always included other youth and crazy leaders. We were inspired to get involved, and if we had an idea relating to the church, we were encouraged to put it into action.

These ideas included a wall of sticky notes inspired by the scene in 'Bruce Almighty'. Each sticky note had something that we were thankful for on it, and we provided sticky notes to the congregation to add to the wall. We also ran a successful 'Warm Fuzzies' campaign three years in a row to send heartfelt notes to other members of the congregation.

The youth are an integral part of the church, with another young lady and myself serving as Sunday School Teachers. My sister and three other Youth members are part of the Praise Team that helps to lead the worship every Sunday in the 'Encounter' Service. Another boy helps run the sound board at the same service.

The Youth group has also been the driving force behind our church's many renovations in the past few years that include: an overhaul of the nursery, a mural at the entrance to the classrooms for Sunday School and renovations of all six washrooms.

Our present youth leader is an enthusiastic lady who always enlists our help whenever the church is organizing an event. As a young person, I can see how much we help our church, and how empty it would be if we were not there. Our Youth many be small by other standards, as our Senior Youth Group only numbers at 6, but we feel like an army.



We help the church by providing talent, strength, bodies, care, enthusiasm, humour and vitality. We help by providing labour. We help by providing a future.

We will be the backbone of the church in the years to come, and I only hope that we can continue to stay as involved. I hope that we can continue to grow in our faith, and we can continue to support our church through the highs and lows, as they have done for us.

Heather is a 17 year old high school student in Whitby, ON. She has attended St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Whitby for her entire life. She plans to attend university for International Development in the fall.



By Lindsey Nigra

Many young adults feel restricted and voiceless in their traditional Presbyterian churches and congregations. Whereas for myself, the Presbyterian Church is a supportive network of friends and family and has supplied me with endless opportunities.

I attend the Richmond Hill Presbyterian Church. As a 23 year-old young woman ready to take on the world, establish her career and ideal lifestyle, the Presbyterian Church has proven to be a wonderful support system and has provided me with endless opportunities that will help me strive for and be successful in life. Of course, it has provided me with faith that gives me strength and endurance to get out of bed every morning, but in addition, the Presbyterian Church has given me countless amazing, unique opportunities over the years.

Like in many Presbyterian churches, I stand out because I am one of the few young adults who fill the church pews on a Sunday morning. Despite being the minority and younger than the majority of the congregation, I have and continue to experience the utmost support from my congregation. It is a wonderful feeling knowing that I have earned their support over the years. In the past I have taught Sunday School, been an active youth group member and have been asked to be on session. While participating in my congregation, I gained their respect and they gained mine, and I feel honoured to have done so. It is an amazing feeling to know that when I speak they listen and act is necessary. For example, they now are aware of and support the issue of teen suicide and prevention, and financially support a collapsed Presbyterian Church in Grenada destroyed by Hurricane Ivan. My church experiences have helped build my communication and public speaking skills, event coordination skills, have developed me socially and help me converse with adults in comfortable and mature manner.

Outside of my home congregation I have been a member of Presbyterian Young People's Society (PYPS), been on their weekend planning committees; served as a weekend convenor and as their newsletter editor. My involvement in PYPS is something I do not take for granted. PYPS has given me transferable skills, strengthened my faith and given me lifelong friends.

In 2006 I took part in two larger than life mission projects. Thanks to my involvement in the church and community, I recognize how blessed I am and enjoy helping the less fortunate. I was honoured to be a part of the Canada Youth 2006 planning team, with a specific focus

on the Mission Track curriculum. Mission Track was comprised of 40 university students from across Canada, who learned about the importance of mission and assisted non-profit organizations in the communities. This opportunity gave me a chance to incorporate my love of mission into the program but to also learn about mission from the perspectives of others my age. My experience will never be forgotten.

A week later through Youth in Mission, I travelled to Grenada for three weeks. With 30 others from all over the world, I took my mission experience to the next level. Here we dissected the meaning of mission and then organized and executed a Vacation Bible School for Grenadian children. My afternoons were spent painting and repairing a small building that was a temporary holding school for the village because their school remained roofless due to hurricane destruction. I was then encouraged to think of how I would continue my mission experience back home. I did so by sharing my Grenada story of hurricane destruction with my congregation who offered their support by financially adopting the ruined Presbyterian Church. Without this opportunity through the church, I would not be the young Christian lady I am today. Because of this trip I am a stronger, more understanding and compassionate individual. Like always, I am very thankful.

Many people I meet are amazed at my involvement in and outside of the church and community at the age of 23. I tell them that it is easy when your heart and mind are dedicated and when you have a strong support system. The church has always been and continues to be my support system and family in more ways than one.



Lindsey Nigra is a full time student completing her post graduate certificate in Public Relations at Humber College and completed her Honours Bachelor of Arts and Business degree at the University of Waterloo. Lindsey is from Richmond Hill and is a member of the Richmond Hill Presbyterian Church.

By Connie Purvis

I'm 20-something woman on the verge of university graduation. I've got an eclectic spattering of knowledge, a new-found love of theories that begin with "post" and end with "ism," and a knack for intellectual contortionism. As a Christian, I've found that Sunday school answers just don't cut it anymore; my attempts to mesh faith-knowledge and culture-knowledge have forced me to consider old things from new perspectives. And in consumer culture, much to my annoyance, I'm about to be part of a lucrative target market.

Everywhere, it seems, I'm defined by transition, by shifting definitions, and by a multi-faceted identity only a fraction of which I've constructed myself.

In a culture in which I'm defined by what I'm *becoming* rather than what I *am*, my faith has been a firm handhold. It's been a constant reminder of where I've come from and what I *want* to become. But that doesn't mean it's been comfortable. There have been moments when I've felt like I'm holding on by my fingernails. Cultural theory and organized religion don't always mix well. I've had a lot of doubts about my life, my faith, and my future. Heck, I still do. And those doubts have translated into a feeling of unease when I'm asked to speak out in the Church.

For example, in September of last year, *The Presbyterian Record* published an entirely youth-driven issue. As a member of the Presbyterian Young People's Society, I snapped up the opportunity. After struggling through several topics, I ended up writing a short, self-reflective piece about the odd middle ground I seem to occupy. It was about transition, and expectation, and the cultural indoctrination which says that someday—on the other side of "education"—lurks "reality." I wrote it knowing that people would read it, but without realizing its wide-reaching response. People of all ages from all kinds of church communities contacted me. I found my article stapled to bulletin boards, and passed on to other over-achieving young women. My work, as seemingly insignificant as it was, was being taken seriously.

It proved to me that the church is thirsting to hear from its youth. Yet it seems like we're hesitant to speak. As I struggled through this article, I questioned what still holds me back. Why do I feel uncomfortable sharing my perspective? The more I asked myself that question, the more I realized that, even knowing that the church wants to hear young

voices, I'm uncomfortable speaking out because I'm young. When it all comes down to it, I, as a young person (even a supposedly intelligent, educated young person), feel painfully ignorant. After all, I've only been on this planet for 20 short years. I

have limited experience, a limited education, and, to be perfectly honest, a limited faith. So when an opportunity like this presents itself, I find myself writing hesitatingly—self-consciously—with a sense that I'm not qualified. I'm not strong enough in my belief, or firm enough in my church-going, or clear enough in my understanding. I don't know enough to know what to say.

But maybe that's what needs to be said.

God has a crazy way of choosing totally under-qualified people to do amazing things. So sure, I'm an ignorant creature who's got a lot to learn. But, God willing, I'll always be learning, and growing, and *becoming*. I'll *always* be a work-in-progress. That's a part of this crazy thing we call life. And, however unformed or unworthy I consider them to be, I pray that God can use my experiences somehow. In fact, I know He can. He's cool like that.

Connie is currently completing her final year at Wifrid Laurier University in Waterloo; this spring she'll be graduating with an Honours degree in Communication Studies and English. She's a member of the CNOB Presbyterian Young People's Society, the editor-in-chief of an undergraduate journal, and she works part-time at her university's Writing Centre. One day she hopes to continue her studies at the graduate level, but for now she looks forward to moving back to Toronto and resuming her involvement in her home church, Westview Presbyterian.



When the Personal Becomes Political¹

By Zahra Brown

You know what they say, "When you're down to nothing, God is up to something." That's my motto! As a minister's daughter, it was very hard to connect with my faith after my mother left the church where I was baptized and where I spent all my childhood. The changes were like going outside in a bitterly cold winter without a winter jacket.

Last summer, I experienced a transformation in my life at the Presbyterian Youth Conference, organized by the PCUSA and held at Montreat, North Carolina. I was invited to be a part of the leadership of the conference on the keynote drama team. I was really nervous but at the same time, I knew that taking up new opportunities could open doors and lead me to a better life. I took up that offer and it was really amazing, because for the first time, I was able to go on a trip where I was on my own - not with the youth group from my church or my school. Not with my friends. It was an extremely challenging experience but I learned to be independent and how to teamwork with the members and leaders at the conference. The conference gave me a chance to develop my acting and public speaking skills, two things that I always dreamed of doing.

During the conference they used a video clip from the Spiderman movie, which was all about the search for identity. As members of the keynote drama team we had to share something about our identities and our connections with God. The bible story of Jonah was one of the themes of the conference and that story spoke to me - my entire life. The stories I shared on stage were the low-points of my life - the days when I thought I would not be able to be the person I wanted to be as I struggled with being hard of hearing and having cerebral palsy.

But the verse that really touched me was when Jonah was swallowed by a giant fish; he said his prayer and then the fish vomited Jonah out. I felt I had lived for a long time in the wet belly of the fish. At Montreat, I was helped to rediscover myself as a person and I gained new faith - something that I think I needed in order to know myself better. My story inspired people and for me, the personal became political at Montreat. Even though the stories of struggles that I shared at the Conference happened way

back in the past, Montreat stitched the wounds and helped me to turn the page and helped others as well.

Disability is such a big barrier. To struggle with a disability is to struggle against the social construction of disability that suggests that persons with disabilities are designed to be nothing or to be less than. It is a hard place to be because the society is filled with prejudices and it continues to promote negative constructions and reinforce barriers. But when the first thing that I say is "I can't do it", that itself becomes a barrier, which keeps me from recognizing possibilities, and at the end of the day, it allows stereotyping to prosper. Right now, I believe that teaching, script writing, and public speaking will make my personal experiences become political and that's my dream. Maya Angelo says it best when she says, "If you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it, change your attitude. Don't complain."

*Sometimes I can't
Keep up on track with the real world
I tend to break down in my own corner
Sometimes I feel I've missed the bus full of opportunities
I ask the Lord for help & to build my faith + strength
I gotta always know that
Missing that same bus
Is not the end of the universe
I can always take the train + other routes
For other opportunities.*

Zahra Brown was born in Jamaica and grew up in Toronto. She is a 2004 Seneca College graduate in General Arts & Science. Zahra has always had a passion for writing and also enjoys dancing and public speaking. Currently a York University student majoring in Womens Studies, her goal is to become a teacher for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing.



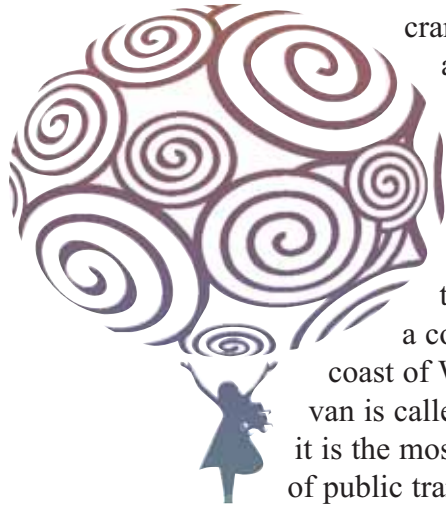
¹When our personal experiences are used to create changes for justice, then they are no longer personal and not just about us. They become political.

²The theme of the Montreat 2007 Presbyterian Youth Conference was "Turning the Page."

³Taken from my poem, "Keeping on Track."

Faith and the Agnostic Woman in Ghana

By Alison Lang



I am sitting in a rickety, cramped VW van in a giant dusty parking lot filled with hundreds of rickety, cramped VW vans, in Accra, the capital city of Ghana, a country on the coast of West Africa. The van is called a “tro tro” and it is the most prevalent form of public transit in the city. It is 30 degrees Celsius in the mid-

dle of the dry season, and the driver will not take us to our destination until the van is stuffed to the brim with commuters. Sweat drips off my nose and onto my jeans as I sit with the other passengers and wait. And wait. We sit stock still, trying not to move. I wonder if it is possible to be any more uncomfortable. And then suddenly, a man leaps onto the bus with us. Despite the heat he is dressed in a grey suit and tie. He is smiling. His eyes gleam huge and brown and ecstatic.

“May the Lord be with you!” he roars.

A silence follows - as thick as the hot, polluted air. The man’s expression is inscrutable. He pauses, and then, more insistently:

“MAY THE LORD BE WITH YOU!”

“And also with you,” murmurs the crowd on the tro tro. Finally full, the vehicle is set to move off. The man remains with us. For the entirety of our 45-minute ride, he remains. And he preaches, and preaches, and preaches, at the top of his lungs, looking at all of us in turn. And the people in the tro tro sit, and some of them listen, and most continue to murmur their assent when he pauses in his lecture; “Ah-men.”

At the end of the ride, before everyone stumbles out into the hot, dusty streets, hands reach forward to take some of the damp pamphlets our preacher has been wielding throughout the drive.

I’ve been here for six months – but it took me all of two days here to realize that this type of PDP (Public Display of Piety) was something that would take some getting used to.

In Ghana, faith is everywhere. It floods onto the streets from stalls selling gospel CDs. It lights up buildings at three in the morning when members of the charismatic church wander around the room, speaking in tongues as you walk home from a night out. It causes the country’s electoral commission to consider changing the day that the country goes to the polls to elect Ghana’s next president in December – because that day happens to fall on a Sunday. And yes, sometimes it rides with you to work and back in the form of an evangelical tro-tro preacher, and there is no way to get away from it.

And the pervasiveness of religion in Ghana is by no means exclusive to Christianity. I recently took a trip to the capital of Ghana’s northern region, Tamale, where the population is overwhelmingly Muslim. I visited a colleague’s workplace only to see reporters leaving halfway through the day to pray at the mosque. During a break on the 14-hour bus ride to the area, I sat on a bench and watched as dignified Muslim women, their heads wrapped in scarves and eyes lined with kohl, spread out a mat in the parking lot, removed their shoes, bent their heads to the earth and worshipped in silence. And, more disruptively, I was awakened every morning by a four-thirty am call to prayer broadcast from the mosque right beside my rooming house.

Although we pride ourselves on our tolerance of different cultures and religions in Canada, I can’t help but wonder how we would deal with a presence as impassioned - and inescapable - as the tro-tro preacher. No doubt he would have been subject to an onslaught of rolling eyes and irritated glares from other passengers – and maybe even forcibly ejected from the car itself. Canadians – and in my experience, Presbyterians – keep their love of God to themselves. When we pray in church, we bow our heads in silence as the minister recites the prayers and benediction. We sing nicely arranged hymns in a reverent and orderly fashion. We rejoice, sure, but our rejoicing happens on the inside, or in privacy.

In Ghana, the opposite occurs. The people in this country celebrate their faith in a completely open and unselfconscious manner, and quite often, it’s beautiful. Sometimes,

Faith and the Agnostic Woman in Ghana (continued)



it can be annoying. And it's especially jarring to see this element in the newsroom where I work. Generally most of us don't think of newsrooms as the most pious of places. Most journalists I know in Canada haven't been to church in years. Not so at JOY FM. Every morning before the editorial meeting, we begin with a prayer. It was easy enough to get used to this – until the day that we switched newsrooms and a preacher was brought in to christen the new working space. As he sang and asked for God to bless the pristine white walls of our working space, my colleagues quivered and shouted beside me. It was an intimate moment and I felt distinctly uncomfortable. Afterwards, I was ashamed by my reticence. Why is this awkward? I asked myself. Although I lapsed into lazy Presbyterianism when I hit my twenties, I was once a good Presbyterian. I did youth group. I sang in the choir. I taught Sunday School, for heaven's sake. There's no need for embarrassment. So I reign in my confused expression, smile and go along with it. And yet, these completely open displays of faith will forever retain an elusiveness

that makes me wistful, and maybe a little sad.

One Sunday, my roommate and I took a walk around the dusty red roads of our neighbourhood. We literally stumbled across the ruins of a half-completed building – the neighbourhood church. Inside, men and women in beautifully patterned traditional clothes sang their lungs out while a preacher swayed at the front of the room and a man banged out the melodies on an old piano. A woman pulled us onto a bench and we stood quietly with the congregation in our jeans and tank tops. We felt grubby and conspicuous in this humble setting and didn't know any of the words to the hymns. And yet, as the gentle unadorned voices rose around me in one sweet melody, and as the women held hands and smiled at us, I didn't feel out of place in the least. Although I don't entirely understand expressions of faith and devotion here, I know it all comes from a place that is good, a place deep down that provides release and for many, some kind of enlightenment. I haven't resolved my own dealings with my faith and I'm not sure I ever will. But as a stranger in this country, wandering far from home, I do feel I've been privy to something that is as intimate as a secret and breathtakingly powerful all at once.

And to take that away with me is enough.

Alison Lang is currently in Accra, Ghana working with reporters at JOY FM covering human rights issues as part of the Canadian NGO Journalists for Human Rights. When not at work, she is eating roasting plantain and playing her djembe on the beach.

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 and Ministry Committee.

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

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