

Finding God in the Holy Land

By Andrew Sharp

If you take a map of the world and draw a line roughly through the middle of the continents, then draw another line down through the halfway point, the lines meet right around the Middle East. Three of the world's major religions also intersect in the Middle East, in the country of Israel—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It makes for a very religious and often very tense atmosphere.

Todd and DeAnn Miller got the chance to travel to Israel and feel that atmosphere right before Easter. They were working with a missions team in Nazareth—Todd directs REACH, a short-term missions program, for Rosedale Mennonite Missions. After spending a week with the team, they had another week to explore the area and see the sights. They were able to take in a lot of the local culture and history, and the deeply religious atmosphere gave them a lot of food for thought.



There were a lot of highlights. One was climbing the mountain fortress of Masada, where Jewish rebels committed suicide rather than surrender to the Roman army. Impressively, they made the steep climb at 5:30 in the morning! They also got a taste of the craziness of the markets in the old city of Jerusalem, floated in the Dead Sea, walked on the Mount of Olives on Palm Sunday, and experienced natural beauty along the streams in the Golan Heights.

One thing that really stood out to them during their time there, DeAnn said, was the way Christians over the centuries have enshrined every holy place connected to Jesus. There is a gaudy church at Jesus' supposed birthplace. Another one was built at the crucifixion site, and still another where the tomb was believed to be. These sites are regarded as powerful and places to receive a blessing by Christians from all over the world. "After a while," DeAnn said, "it made us almost sick to watch people kiss these places and wave their souvenir trinkets over them to receive some blessing."

Another example of people reaching out to God came at the Western Wall. The cracks in the wall were stuffed full of prayers written on scraps of paper, and spoken prayers in many languages mixed in the air. "I just prayed that our loving God would reveal himself again to these people," DeAnn said.

After seeing people grasping for God in many different ways, an experience on Palm Sunday was very meaningful. It came at a church on the Mount of Olives. A window in the church, decorated with a wrought iron cross, faced out over the valley. Through the cross, the golden Dome of the Rock, a sacred Muslim shrine, was in prominent view. While there, Todd and DeAnn joined a group of Spanish Christians singing in worship. "It was a beautiful reminder of the power of the cross over all things," DeAnn said.

These experiences in the "Holy Land" were reminders that believers aren't really represented by any of the so-called "holy" sites. "We don't ascribe holiness to a location," DeAnn said. "We have the Holy Spirit of God within us, indwelling us. We *are* the temple. And where do I go to get a blessing and feel His presence daily? Not a particular place, but to His very words spoken for me in His Book."

"What a privilege. I don't have to travel anywhere!"

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From the Editor

Welcome to the first issue of "LCF Connection" in 2009. In the past, Connection was printed on a regular basis once or twice every year or so. We're hoping that the current incarnation will come out a little more frequently, once a month to be exact. The idea is that it will be a way to communicate the church's vision and share important information.

Rob asked me to be the editor, possibly because I was underemployed at the time and looking a little crazed from spending long hours in my apartment with nothing to do. I appreciate his thoughtfulness. Now that I have something useful to do, I'd like to assure him and you that the insanity has mostly worn off and I can probably be trusted with this responsibility.

As I said before, the vision is that "LCF Connection" would be a communication tool for the church. Those in leadership can share their ideas and concerns with the rest of us, we can give them feedback, and we can find out what other people in the church are doing. And we can just get to know each other better.

There are several clear advantages to communicating through a monthly newsletter. One is

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London Christian Fellowship seeks to develop authentic and passionate followers of Jesus Christ.

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Message from the Pastor

By Rob Swartz

A few weeks ago our family headed to New Jersey to celebrate my nephew's wedding. We had a great time catching up with my sister Judy, her husband Bob, and the rest of the family. Bob pastors a church in Hawthorne, New Jersey. It's not a huge church and in many ways is pretty ordinary. However, I came away from my time there with a sense of awe, wonder and desire that has stuck with me ever since.

It started on Sunday morning as they prepared to take communion. As various people stood and shared scripture, I was moved by the depth of feeling with which they spoke about Jesus. That evening we stayed with a couple of Bob and Judy's close friends, Deb and Mary Beth. I was intrigued with their non-stop talk about "the Lord". They were full of enthusiasm and excitement about what God was doing. Their faith showed when they said things like "He's not a believer...yet" when referring to a non-Christian friend. They were excited about the youth group and all the non-Christians who were coming. They were so proud of my nephew Jonathan who leads a Bible study for non-believers on his college campus.

We listened to story after story of how God was working and how people were coming to know the Lord. It was so much fun to talk with them. Later that evening Doris & I talked about what was "up" with Deb and Mary Beth, Bob and Judy, and others in the church. What made them different? Larissa had noticed it too and was also curious.

Part of it was probably their bold New York approach to life, but I think the primary difference came from the way they loved Jesus with all their heart. Oh, I'm sure they had their problems, but there was little question about what was most important to them and what got them most excited. They invest their lives into kingdom work—preaching, teaching, Bible studies, kids clubs, summer Bible school, beach mission, summer camp, and the list goes on. Their life is the work of the church.

Why do they do it? It's because they love Jesus, plain and simple. They truly believe that He is the way, the truth, and the life. I know my sister and brother-in-law get discouraged sometimes, like we all do, but I was invigorated and challenged by the passion and love of these believers in New Jersey. They are living examples of I Corinthians 15:58, "Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain."

I've done a lot of thinking since returning to Ohio. Is my love for Jesus this obvious? When people visit my home for an evening, what passion of mine do they pick up on? When a guest spends a Sunday morning service with our church, what do they talk about on the drive home? My hope is that they would see passionate followers of Jesus Christ who love Him above all else.

Elders' Notes

Ideas and thoughts from recent meetings

As time goes by it's easy for a church or any organization to settle into certain ways of doing things. Sometimes it's good to step back and reevaluate normal to see if it's still working. The elders have been doing some of that in their recent meetings, and have come up with several ideas for change.

More interaction

- The first idea is to have more times of connection and interaction than just on Sunday mornings. There could be different ways of doing this, from small groups to socials or other activities. The idea is for people to be able to get to know each other better and help each other.
- "It is difficult for the body of Christ to function as a body if there is limited interaction," Rob Swartz said. "There also needs to be more opportunity to engage in spiritual discussion and study...without connections other than Sunday morning, it is easy to feel like you aren't really a part of the church."
- A renewed emphasis on small groups is one way the elders want to promote this interaction. Small groups provide not only a place to socialize and get to know people but a place for study, discipleship, and accountability. (For more on small groups see the reflections from the post-high small group on page 4).

More opportunities for feedback

- The elders would also like for the congregation to have more chances to give their input into the direction of the church. Of course, not everyone will be happy with every decision, and there are times that the elders simply need to make decisions without asking everyone. But they also see a need for more involvement from the church.
- "Part of this adjustment is the result of feedback received from people in the church," Rob said. "So we are responding to constructive criticism." Also, he said, a church's vision is not simply decided and carried out by the leadership team. Everyone should be a part of fulfilling the mission God has given the church.
- The recent question and answer session about the building project was a way to get people involved, and there will be more such forums in the future. The elders are considering other ways of finding areas that need change and getting input.

How Should We Give?

By Reuben Sairs

The poor—people without enough money. Sometimes they have brought their problems on themselves; sometimes they have just been victims. Victims of what? The list of things that can make you poor is pretty long. Disease. Mental illness. Being born poor certainly doesn't help. In many countries, injustice can make you poor. And sometimes those without money don't act in their own best interest. They can make their poverty worse with bad choices, like falling into predictable traps of substance abuse and unstable relationships.

Why the poor are poor is one question. How exactly we are to help them is an even thornier problem. What are our obligations at LCF? What should be our teaching? One of the topics that the elder's team wants to discuss in the coming year is our obligation to the poor, and the role of good works in this regard.

"Christianity Today" ran an article last December called "Scrooge Lives!" In the article was an unsettling statistic that was a challenge to the church: "The money given by the people in the pews, it turns out, is largely spent on the people in the pews." Only about 3% of the money we give to churches goes to ministry to non-Christians, according to the article. Is this right?

One of the first questions we need to consider is how this ties into our church budget. Should churches just assume that money given to offerings needs to stay in a pretty tight circle? Should we pay the church expenses first, and then meet a suggested contribution to Conference institutions such as Rosedale Mennonite Missions or Rosedale Bible College, only as a last priority giving some money to help the poor?

Most churches probably assume it has to be that way, and hope that the members of the congregation privately give more to specific ministries, according to each person's own sense of obligation. In other words, maybe it's not an issue for a congregation, but an issue for individuals. Keep it out of the church budget, and let everyone do whatever each one thinks is best.

Is that approach working? How often does a church say, "Give your money, but don't give it all here. Save half of what you give, and send it to a ministry that helps the poor"? Some Christians believe in tithing—giving 10% of their income. But should that tithe be given only to their congregations, or could they hold a percentage back for other charitable giving? Some would say there are tithes, and these go to your church, and then there are offerings, and they go to other needs. It would be interesting to find out if that actually happens or is just a fine theory.

As you can see there are many questions. What should we do together as a congregation? What should we teach? What is normal Christian giving when we act alone rather than as a congregation? And it seems that the time is never right. The economy is bad. We're trying to get a building project in motion. Perhaps we should just wait and talk about our responsibility to the poor some other time. Does that sound right to any of us? It didn't sound right to the elders' team, so we hope to keep this topic on our agenda for a while to see where the Lord leads us.

Highlights from the building project update meeting

After church on April 18, a meeting was held to inform the congregation about how the project is going, where it's at, and to give them a chance for input. For those that missed it, here are some of the highlights from that meeting.

Reason

Rob briefly reviewed the reason behind the desire for a bigger building. It came down to having more of an impact. "A bigger building gives us the opportunity to minister to people," Rob said. There would be more space for meeting, studying, growing, and teaching.

Progress

The project is projected to cost about \$1,000,000 or a little more, depending on fluctuating costs. The church currently has around \$360,000 in the building fund and the goal is to reach about \$500,000 before taking out a loan for the rest. The committee estimated that payment on the loan would be around \$5,500 a month.

Commitment

Bob Zachrich explained some of the ideas for organizing giving, saying they would need to have some form of commitment from people to get a grasp on how much giving they can expect. The funding committee suggested dividing up the needed monthly amount into sections or "funding units." Then groups or individuals would form about 30-35 "giving units" that would commit to covering a certain amount of funding units.

Consensus

- For the most part, people agreed that it would be good to reach a set goal of about \$500,000, or 50%, before taking out a loan and proceeding with construction, although opinions varied as to the details. They thought it would be wise to know that the project could be done and was on track before proceeding. Bob pointed out that we don't want to have things go wrong and end up homeless and meeting in Rob's basement. Rob seemed to agree.
- In that spirit of caution, several people advocated reviewing the circumstances once the goal is reached before proceeding with construction, to make sure things are on track.
- It was also pointed out even after a set goal is reached, giving needs to stay at a level that could cover a monthly loan payment. So there would be two parts to the effort—raising 50% to get started, and reaching regular giving at such a level that it could be sustained in the long term.
- Rob pointed out that although we are trying to plan and make wise decisions, we need to have faith in God's ability to supply needs and be sensitive to God's leading in the process. And although we plan fundraisers, he said, we don't know what God might do unexpectedly to provide. Shannon Scheffel reminded everyone that we should commit to prayer for the project as well as committing to give.
- Bob said the idea is that giving will be over and above current giving, not taken away from it. Rob stated frankly that there is an element of sacrificial giving involved.
- Not everyone can or should give at the same level, Levi Miller said. Some in the congregation don't have the means to give much, like college students or the underemployed. It could also be challenging for families with children to locate extra funds.
- Shannon suggested that hearing how others were finding ways to give would encourage people to get involved.

Did you miss the meeting or have a point you forgot to raise when you were there? Send comments to: connection@lcfweb.org and put "building project" in the subject line.

Want to share a story about how you are finding ways to give to the building fund? We can publish it as a way of encouraging others in the congregation and sharing ideas. All stories will be anonymous. Send them to connection@lcfweb.org.



Getting to Know...

Charley Gregg



What do you do for a living?

I coordinate farm operations at the correctional facility in London. I've been in this line of work over 22 years. The prison farm covers roughly 3,000 acres. Roughly one half of that is planted in corn or soybeans each year; the remainder is hay, pasture, woods and related facilities. We milk about 180 Holstein dairy cows, and care for the calves and heifers. Our beef program has 900 steers at six locations. About 90 inmates supply labor at the farm.

How did you hear about LCF?

Through friends at Mechanicsburg Christian Fellowship. We had attended MCF when our daughter Sarah had performed ballet there.

What do you like to do in your spare time?

I enjoy spending time outdoors—farming, hiking, canoeing, camping. I also like to read "The Economist" magazine and books about history. I am learning a little about cooking. I would like to spend more time bicycling and exercising. My music preferences lean towards bluegrass and classical.

If you could go anywhere on vacation, where would it be?

Europe. Ideally, I would like to fly into London in early May, cross the English Channel a few weeks later, and tour France toward the Alps. I'd visit Italy and go through Germany to Scandinavia. Then I'd fly from Paris back to the U.S.

What's something you always wanted to do but haven't gotten around to yet?

Buy a farm somewhere between West Jefferson and West Liberty.

Are you a "cat person" or a "dog person?" Or neither?

Mostly a "dog person," but we have three cats and no dog.

What's your ideal way to spend a weekend?

Listening to music and going in to "Ann and Tony's" in West Jeff for lunch. Then visiting with family and friends near Cable, my hometown in Champaign County. After that, spending an evening with Sandy and Sarah playing Scrabble. If I had a long weekend I would travel to Algonquin Park to canoe. It's a park about 300 miles north of Toronto, Ontario.

Post-high Small Group Update

By Stephanie Harnish

Sometimes it's hard to stay connected to the church family during the week. It's especially hard for me since I don't live in London and have only recently started attending regularly. So when a post-high small group started up, I jumped at the chance to join.

We've been meeting for several months now, and after a recent meeting we talked about how it's been going and what it has meant to us. We concluded that it has served a number of purposes: to connect us, draw us closer to God, spark discussion, and provide a safe place where we can share our hearts and ask for prayer.

The other members of our group are Dan Fredrick, John McConnell, Tonya Breneman, Elizabeth Diller, Ross Kauffman, and Andrew Sharp. Daniel Zeigler and Rachel Sommers also make an appearance from time to time. We try to meet once a week in one of our homes, a coffee shop, or wherever suits. It's flexible. And like good Mennonites, we usually incorporate food into the evening.

We began by breaking up the Sermon on the Mount into different readings each week and discussing what the verses meant. After finishing that we moved on to Richard Foster's "Celebration of Discipline." It covers different ways Christians can deepen their walk with God, like fasting, prayer, and study among others.

For those of us who haven't been going to LCF long, small group has been a way to build relationships. "I think it has really connected the young people at LCF together," Elizabeth said. Dan agreed. "It's really helped me to connect with people... it's really helped to strengthen my relationship with God."

Small group is also a way to spend more time thinking about spiritual things. "It takes you further than if you just go to church on Sunday," John said. "It's a wonderful refresher within the week."

Sharing together has also helped us realize that we're not alone in our questions about how to live out our faith, like when we wrestled with the Sermon on the Mount and tried to figure out what Jesus meant with some of His statements.

It's also a place for accountability, a place for encouragement, and a place where we pray for each other. It's been hard for some of us to learn to admit we need prayer, so we've grown by learning to trust each other and ask for help when we need it. I've realized all over again how powerful it is when friends lift each other up to the throne of God.

While there are lots of benefits, every small group comes with a particular set of challenges. Our main challenge comes from a conscious decision not to have a designated leader. We each take turns leading the evening. In each meeting there is a different style of leadership and we get different insights. It's been a growing experience for those of us who have never led a small group before, and we're developing into better leaders.

The challenge is that because we don't have one person in charge, per se, communication and scheduling can be difficult. It's not a bad thing, but we have to intentionally make sure planning our next meeting doesn't fall by the wayside as we're chatting afterwards.

Another challenge, in a way, is our age. Everyone is fairly young. It's possible we could improve our group and our discussions by inviting older people into our group. "We could incorporate that within a small group," Elizabeth said, "where we have college-age people that are asking these kinds of tough questions that we're struggling with, [and] have older people...in the group too, saying 'hey, we went through that too and this is what we have to offer.'" There is so much we could learn from those who have walked with Jesus longer and through more of life than we have. It's something to consider for the future.

Small group has been a blessing to all of us, and I think it will continue to be as we keep on learning more about ourselves, our faith, and God.

From the Editor
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that instead of waiting in line for tickets to elders' meetings (which sell out fast anyway) you can read about some of the things they talked about. Sure, we have to leave out a lot of the exciting details, but you can still get the main ideas.

Another advantage is that it provides an outlet for creativity. Do you take photos? Share them! Have something to say? Write it down (free editing provided). Essays, musings, poems, humor—if you think it speaks to the church, send it our way. We'd like to eventually include all kinds of things on the website that don't fit a printed version. Maybe vocal recordings, videos, graphics, or whatever else people in the church can create to share that will bless the rest of us.

So feel free to take part in this newsletter. If you think something should be included, let me know. Share your ideas. Give feedback on articles. Point out grammatical errors and typos. Criticize. Just kidding, I hate criticism. But you can humbly point out mistakes that anyone could have made.

Send everything to: connection@lcfweb.org. I'd be glad for the help.



Email Poll

Should Rob get a pay cut every time he mentions the University of Michigan from the pulpit?

- 1) Yes
- 2) No
- 3) He should get a raise

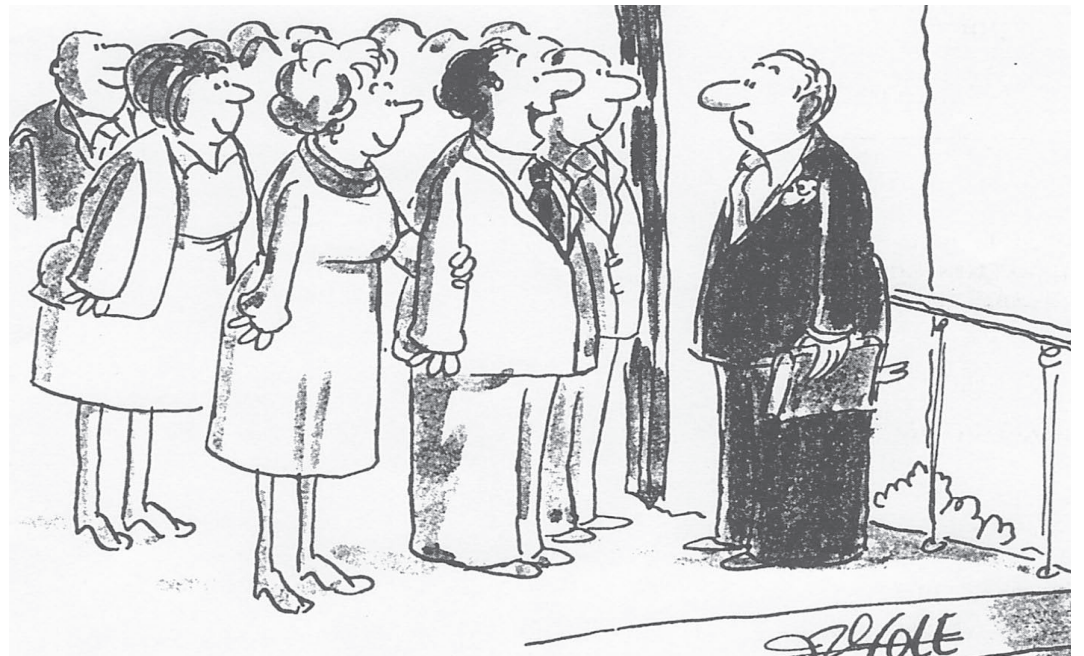
Email responses to connection@lcfweb.org with "poll" in the subject line.

The LCF Connection

A monthly newsletter designed to enhance communication at London Christian Fellowship

In the future, we'll have a Letters to the Editor section if there is enough feedback. If you'd like to make comments on any of the stories or "LCF Connection" in general, email us at: connection@lcfweb.org.

Editor: Andrew Sharp
Layout: Doris Swartz



"Are we glad to hear that you don't know where you'll get the money for the building fund! For a minute there we were afraid you wanted to get it from us."