

WELCOMING NEW MEMBERS

St. Marks continues to be blessed with new members joining for worship and sharing in ministry. Welcome! We are all more for your presence -- and we don't just mean numbers!. We pray that you find blessing here even as you contribute to the blessing.

Long-time members: extend greetings and welcomes to the new faces you meet on Sunday morning. They are all friendly! Get to know them and draw them into the circle. Embrace them with the spirit of St. Mark's!

Some newer members are coming from long established church participation while others come with little, if any, experience of church. Regardless, it is no doubt at times confusing here -- what are they doing? what does that mean? that's not how we did it! Don't be shy about asking questions. And offering suggestions! "We" expect that "You" will change "Us!" Each new member adds to our spirit, giving it shape and voice and faith!

A quick few words about St. Mark's. We seek to be a progressive, inclusive and life-affirming Christian community of faith within The United Church of Canada. What does this mean?

Progressive means that it is our commitment to engage faith, scripture and tradition in ways that do not presume that all the answers are behind us, buried somewhere in our tradition, but very much around us and before us. Remember what John Wesley taught -- we must approach faith from the perspectives of our scriptures, the learnings of our tradition, the experiences of our own life and time, all mixed with our God-given capacities to think, reason, and see. We don't reject the *mythos* of our tradition but neither do we embrace it as literal or fixed for all time.

Inclusive reflects our commitment to being an affirming ministry within The United Church of Canada. We seek to be respectful of and provide a safe place of faith for all, regardless of ability, age, class, ethnicity, gender, race, or sexual orientation.

And affirming the inherent blessing of life is a life-practice that we are all learning: this realm is good; it is filled with blessing; and both good and blessing are instilled in each one of us. We work to enhance that blessing, to build it up. We seek to respect the creation and do all we can to nurture and protect it.

We aren't perfect. We haven't *arrived*, yet. We are all still learning. But we are travelling together, learning with each other, and, together, revelling in a spirit of Life and Being that embraces us and holds tenaciously to us.

St. Mark's: progressive, inclusive, and life-affirming. Welcome!

CONGREGATIONAL MEETING

Sunday, February 8th

Our annual congregational meeting at which we receive the financial accounts for the previous year and review the budget objectives for the new year will be held on Sunday, February 8th, after the morning service. We'll share a light lunch and then do some work together.

MITTEN TREED

Thanks, again, to everyone who contributed warm items to our mitten tree in the back entrance way. Bags of scarves, gloves, mitts and socks have gone off to our partner, West Hill Community Services, to be distributed in the community.



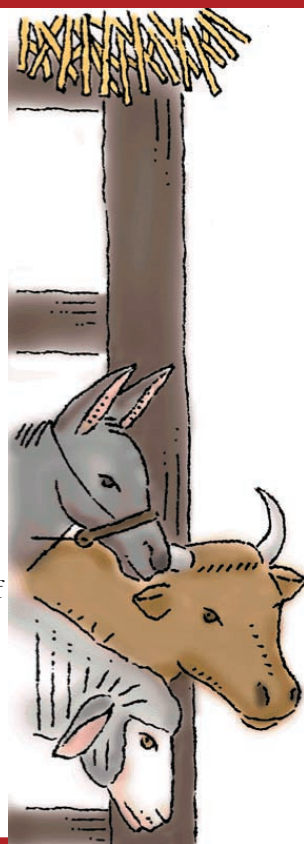
THINKING ABOUT IT

John Buchanan, editor of The Christian Century, writes in the December 16, 2008 issue,

"Think of what the Christmas story says about God -- about how vulnerable God is.

"God puts this whole project in the hands of a carpenter and his wife. God comes in a way that forces individuals to make decisions and act on them. God becomes vulnerable to, subject to, human beings whose decisions and actions either will or will not advance God's kingdom. When God acts, it is not a matter of pulling strings, pulling off great cosmic miracles. It is a matter of stirring a man or a woman to be responsible, to live and act faithfully, to do what God wants done."

Think about it.



The MEMO

The Newsletter of St. Mark's United Church, 115 Orton Park Road, Toronto M1G 3G9

www.st-marks.ca

January, 2009

UNIMAGINABLE HOPE

Rev. Alan Hall

Happy New Year to you! It is my hope that over these holy days around Christmas you have found moments of pause, grace, and surprise!

Many of us are glad to see 2008 pass. It has been filled with many unexpected challenges, some of a seemingly cosmic character. Haven't all of us at times felt quite overwhelmed?

On the first Sunday of '09 I remarked on the flood of "unexpecteds" described in the Christmas stories. Joseph and Mary's plans to marry get interrupted by an inexplicable pregnancy. New plans are put in place -- the marriage will be called off and Mary will be sent to a distant relative. Then an angel appears, changing the plans, again. *Take her as your wife*, Joseph is told. *Do not be afraid*, Mary is told. Just as these messages get folded into new plans, the Emperor intervenes, ordering a census. Now they'll have to go to Bethlehem. But before they are counted, a child trumps even the imperial plans: Mary gives birth. Shepherds and magi get caught up in all these changes, imposing changes upon them, their routines and routes. As Matthew tells the story, politics interrupt again, sending the family into a Mosaic exile in Egypt.

Interruptions. Plans laid to ruins. Lives changed.

OK, so these stories aren't historical fact, but they are true human experience: we've all encountered life's unexpected, and often unwelcomed, interruptions. Most of them are rather minor, changing the route we take to school, imposing a change in our day's schedule, or altering tonight's dinner plans. But some of them are major, earth shaking -- a medical diagnosis, a lost job, a marital breakup. Not what we'd planned on, not what we'd allowed for, not what we intended.

There are many profound and faith-filled layers to these ancient stories we tell at Christmas but one that stands out for me as we go into 2009, after all of the unexpecteds of 2008, is that Mary and Joseph are depicted embracing their interruptions and, in doing so, unleashing extraordinary opportunities for the divine to be seen, known, and experienced. And not just by them! The shepherds and the magi embrace their interruptions and find themselves drawn into the holy and made one with the holy. In an unlikely place, in each of their stories, unimaginable hope was born.

2009 is before us. What it holds for us we cannot know. What we can be sure is that as we are carried on the currents of this year, we are not alone, God is with us. We are with each other and we are with that Spirit of Life and Being that holds us in all times, in all places, in life and in death. In each of the challenges and changes we meet, embrace the new and expect that even there unimaginable hope can be born.

Blessings in this new year.



The United Church of Canada

L'Eglise Unie du Canada

St. Mark's is a progressive, inclusive, life-affirming Christian community of faith within The United Church of Canada.

Worship services are held Sundays at 11 am.

St. Mark's offers a range of online services and material at www.st-marks.ca.



50 FOR 50
CHRISTMAS HAMPER PROJECT

Marg Mooney,
Chair of Outreach Ministries Team

St. Mark's successfully completed its Christmas project, "50 for 50", on December 19, 2008. This was a variation on the usual Christmas Hampers we furnish each year for families in need through West Hill Community Services. Because 2008 was St. Mark's 50th anniversary, we decided to fill 50 hampers, instead of the usual 30 we have provided in previous years.



"Hamper" is actually a misnomer. One hamper consists of three large boxes containing food for at least a week, including the contents of a Good Food Box of fresh fruit and vegetables from Food Share, a food voucher to cover a holiday feast of the family's choice, and gifts for all members of the family.

Many of the families whose names we received are known to the staff at West Hill Community Services. They are people who normally use the food bank there, sometimes the clothing or furniture banks, and who participate in the programmes offered through WHCS. In 2008, over 800 families in that agency's catchment area were registered for hampers. We had newcomers to Scarborough, even to Canada; it was one family's first Christmas in the country. Among our families were many cultures and different faith traditions.

Awesome teamwork is the only term that can be used to describe how "50 for 50" happened. When this project was being organized, and the Outreach ministry team asked for help, it was like the trust exercise from when we were kids, when you'd stand in front of someone and fall backwards and he or she would catch you. Outreach was the kid and the congregation caught us.

People adopted two and three families and shared with co-workers and family members, making it a group project. One member held a "Pink Cup" party on the weekend of the Grey Cup, inviting guests to bring food, make a donation, or adopt a family. Another member who annually organizes a huge children's Christmas party for her workplace brought in bags of extra, leftover toys. This enabled us to add to some of the larger families' hampers and donate some to WHCS for inclusion with their hampers.

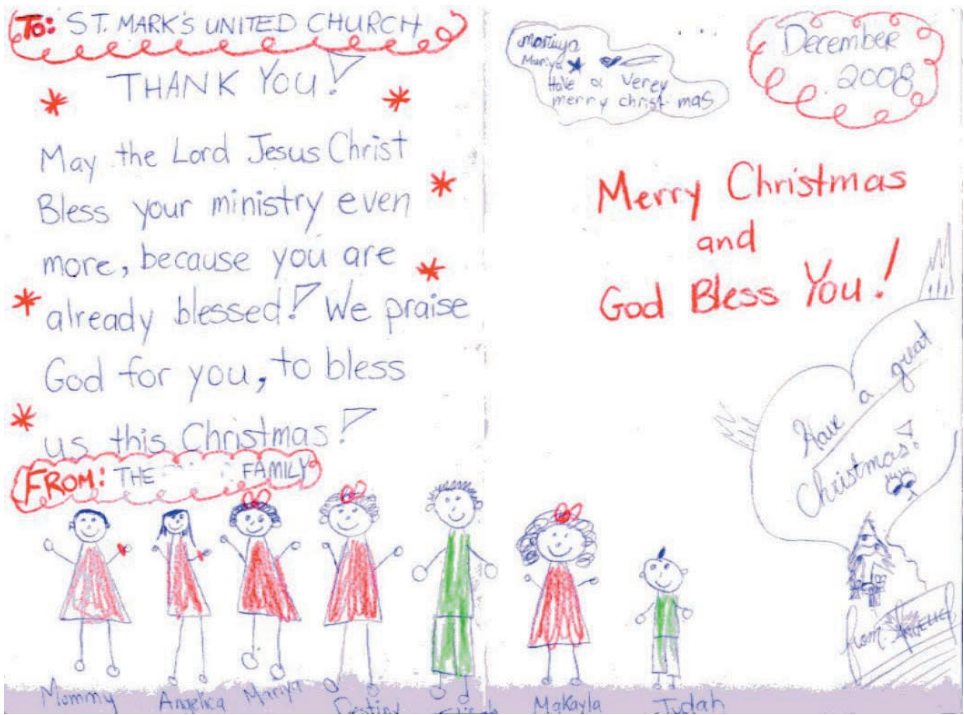
People in the congregation who have faced heartbreaking challenges this year, some still in the midst of crises, did their part as usual, not letting down the St. Mark's team. And people from the neighbourhood brought in money and

food donations. Several times there were bags of groceries at the front door when Carol arrived at work. Volunteers aplenty appeared to pack boxes and deliver them.

As in former years, those of us who delivered the hampers were humbled. Some recipients were inarticulate in their emotion, except for repeating "thank you" again and again. Some gave us beautiful cards and notes, expressing gratitude that their families would actually be able to celebrate the holiday.

Yes, St. Mark's did a really good job. And three days after the last delivery people were talking about, "next year". Some also spoke of how the hampers are only a band aid solution. The question was raised about what could be done to remedy the poverty situation so that, in the long run, people won't have to avail themselves of this project. That could be a long discussion.

The good news is that for some of our families this year's hamper was a "hand up", not a "hand out". Next year will be better for them. And the good news for others is that St. Mark's will keep up its long-held tradition and fill hampers again in 2009.



'Twas the night
before Christmas . . .

Delivering to a family with five children, our members noticed an older boy. Wasn't the eldest child supposed to be a girl? Couldn't have been. But it stayed in the back of the mind . . .

A box of laundry soap was missed from the first delivery so 'twas the night before Christmas when a second delivery was made . . . and the same older boy was there. Check the list twice, the eldest child *is* a girl! Oh, my, have we missed someone? Have we made a mistake?

All through the service the question grew, *Who is that boy? Does he have any presents?*

The family was at the 7:00 Christmas, too. There was the mystery boy again! The question persisted, *Who is he? Does he have any presents?*"

There was a chance to ask: he's 16, the mother's brother, and just joined the family from out of the country.

And no, there are no gifts in the boxes for him!

The service ends. Once home our members scurry all through the house. Christmas stockings are raided, warm gloves are found, a soccer ball, a game, a frisbee and chocolate. The rustle of wrapping paper wrapping. Warm up the car!

And back they went to the family's apartment.

The 16 year old comes to the door. *"Mom, you should have seen his face melt into a BIG smile :) And he thanked us three times!"*

'Twas the night before Christmas and now all in the house had gifts under the tree !

This *is* the spirit of St. Mark's. Thank you all for embracing it!

An Imperfect Offering

Katharina Manassis reviews Dr. James Orbinski's
book on humanitarian action

If you are looking for a prescription for effective humanitarian action in the 21st century from Dr. Orbinski, this book will be disappointing. It raises more questions than it answers. If you are looking for a gripping, often disturbing, memoir of one man's attempt to make a difference against seemingly overwhelming odds, this is definitely a book to read.

Orbinski works with Medecins sans Frontieres (Doctors without Borders), a non-governmental organization he eventually comes to lead and that garners a Nobel Prize. While practicing medicine in various war and disaster zones around the globe, he wrestles with fundamental questions about human suffering, what motivates some to inflict suffering, and what it means to be a humanitarian.

The questions are many: Can we really create "*humanitarian space*" that is independent of politics, as Orbinski's group attempts to do? Is speaking out about atrocities possible without taking sides in a conflict, and thus jeopardizing the ability to continue humanitarian work? Should aid be conditional on respect for human rights? Should aid continue when much of it is diverted to support local militias rather than the civilian population?

As Orbinski shows, the answers are often complex and may vary in different cultures and circumstances. His own ideas are somewhat inconsistent, sometimes decrying the stupidity of interventions by outside powers oblivious to conditions on the ground, and at other times advocating decisive military action to restore order and stop the killing. They beg the question: is there ever a military solution? One thing is clear: there are no easy or "perfect" answers.

At the same time, Orbinski devotes only a single page (of about 400) to advice on what we can each do about the global problems he encounters. Basically, it boils down to lobbying for social justice and joining an NGO as he did. I've known a couple of colleagues who did this type of work overseas, and in both cases their families broke up upon their return. It might have happened anyway, of course, but it raises a further question: is it better to sign up for a precarious humanitarian intervention in the developing world, or to "think globally but act locally" and address the problems in one's day to day life?

Ultimately, Orbinski ends up doing a bit of both: he becomes an advocate for affordable medication for the developing world and community-based AIDS programs, but stops flying into war zones in recognition of his responsibility to his own young family.

In summary, this book challenges us to think about what individuals, governments, and non-government organizations can do to make this a less violent, more just world for all. There are no perfect answers, but that doesn't mean we should stop trying. When asked why his organization does what they do, Orbinski simply answers "because we can".

This review, and others, may be found on our website, www.st-marks.ca. Orbinski's book is in our church library (and also available through the Toronto Public Library) and will be discussed over lunch on January 11th.