

One woman's passion for Bible births yearlong study

by Laurie Oswald Robinson

Cindy Beecher and her husband, Bob, pastor at Beatrice (Neb.) Mennonite Church, had only been at the congregation for two months before they attended Western District Conference's launch of the Year of the Bible last August.

Shortly after the conference Cindy Beecher began to sense a call to connect her passion for God's Word with her passion to serve women at her new church. She wanted to transform her love for the Bible into a tool to help others grow.

This tool became a yearlong resource, *Read Through the New Testament in One Year Bible Study and Devotional*. More than a dozen women at her church have been meeting every Thursday in either morning or evening sessions to share their reflections on the study and to fellowship. And people across the conference are also invited to use the downloadable resource, found at www.yearofthebiblenetwork.org.



"It's always been my conviction that if we want to experience the Spirit-filled and joy-filled life the Lord wants to give us, then we need to personally study and apply what he has to say," she said. "I spent much time in prayer so as to be open to the Lord in helping me to create the questions that could encourage growth," Beecher said. The goal was to lead all of us into a deeper intimacy with the Lord and into true change as his disciples."

The study is set up in seven-day sections. For five days, one **reads** a portion of scripture; **relates** to a portion of scripture by answering questions; **responds** to a portion of scripture by journaling or writing a prayer to God; and **remembers** a portion of scripture by memorizing. And then for two days, participants **reflect** on the lessons they've learned and the memory verse they've been memorizing. This pattern will continue for one year.

**Read Through
The New Testament
In One Year
Bible Study and Devotional**

Year of the Bible
PLAN IT READ IT STUDY IT
PRAY IT LIVE IT

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"We as Christian women have a commonality around the Word of God," she said. "We are different people who sometimes think differently and act differently because of different personalities and gifts. But when we come together around the Word, we begin to see real body life take place. Believers don't escape pain and sorrow in this life. But this weekly gathering helps us offer each other care in a safe place."

Participant Kay Wiens, longtime member of Beatrice Mennonite, said she appreciates the daily discipline as well as the weekly accountability and nurture. "The daily discipline of trying to be a better disciple is wonderful for me," she said.

"Not only are we having a new opportunity to grow in our relationship with God each day. Each week, we are also growing more closely to each other as we share and pray together. What I appreciate most about our Bible study is the fact that it provides an opportunity to read and study through the entire New Testament in a year."

Coming Events

February 1 and March 1
WDC Resource Library open
(10 am-12 pm)

April 25-27
Pastor/Spouse Retreat
Camp Mennoscah

July 4-6
WDC Annual Assembly
Lakeview Camp & Retreat
Ctr.
Waxahachie, TX

WDC Garden

Stories from Western District Conference
February/March 2014



Artistry proclaims the story

by Laurie Oswald Robinson

When Pastor Renee Kanagy at New Creation Fellowship asked for a volunteer to provide visuals for the five-week season of Advent leading into Epiphany, George Krievins – like Mary in the Christmas story -- took a leap of faith that birthed something new.

Though Krievins, an architect, had not painted since high school, he created a five-panel painting (pentaptych) that included the Annunciation, the birth of Jesus and the Visit of the Magi. By painting a new panel each week, Krievins, by Sunday, Jan. 5, finished the piece that spanned the front of the sanctuary in the Sister Frieda Chapel in Newton, Kansas. The chapel was built in 1954 as part of the former Bethel Deaconess Hospital and was later purchased by New Creation.

He said his architecture background has helped him to appreciate the colonial-style chapel. So when the call came for a volunteer, he saw his opportunity to make the space – and the story – to come alive. His inspiration came from comments Kanagy made in Sunday school on healing spaces.

"This space is so well done from a design point of view, with its arched ceilings, lighting and correct proportions, which makes it a very peaceful place to be," he said. "I saw my opportunity to enhance this

space so others could better see what is here and how beautifully it works as a whole. ... Space, and what is in it, deeply affects how we worship.

"In doing this project, I answered a question that Jude McCulley raised in a sermon, 'How do you make an old story new?' I learned that to make a story as old as the Christmas story become new and relevant, I had to retell it myself. And if retelling it in words is not enough to make it vital, then I need to tell it in a way that is outside my comfort zone."

The project, though very stretching from start to finish, brought fresh poignancy to his Christmas, Krievins said. "Christmas was less stressful, as I connected with the very deep meaning of what the season is all about," he said. "Once a week, I took my paints and brushes and worked in the sanctuary all by myself for four or five hours as I played music in the background. It was a very contemplative time."

"It felt as if the whole process was being guided by the Spirit. I was constantly reminded by the challenges of creating this – as well as the other things other people found meaningful in the artwork that I didn't intend -- that I was not in as much control as I thought I was."

One thing Krievins did shape, however, was the original conception of the artwork which he shared in



the bulletin each week. He writes, "The five panels visually represent heaven and earth. The heavens arching down symbolize the Creator's longing for relationship with his creation, and the earth arching upwards symbolizes the reciprocal longing of mankind. The patterns on the land echo the mile roads and fields of the Midwest, placing us in the center of this cosmic tension.

"Three shepherds stand in silhouette outside a sheepfold. ... There are countless numbers of sheep in the sheepfold that stretches towards the horizon, and a ripe field of wheat fills the foreground, signs of the Creator's care and provision for creation. But there is yet no shepherd to guard the gate. One star twinkles in the sky above the shepherds. Is it a sign?"



... The field of wheat and the vineyard foreshadow bread and wine ... the body and blood of Christ, a coming sacrament that celebrates the restoration of our relationship with God."

To depict the nativity, Krievins paints Joseph holding Jesus. "Faith is a journey, and in this moment, on a cold dark night in a stable, far from friends and family, God's incarnation is a mystery that is challenging to grasp," he wrote. "Mary believes, a belief entangled with the emotions of motherhood, but very real. Her faith connects her to God in heaven, even as God is connecting humankind through his birth."

The river represents a stream in the desert, symbolic of the living water that Christ brings to the thirsty places in our lives.

"Even as the west half of this pentaptych depicts a fruitful earth, the east side will balance that with a more rocky, dry, and thorny reality," he wrote.

To explain the Epiphany imagery, he wrote, "The three kings come bearing gifts to welcome the newborn king...we don't know who they were, or from where they came, or even their number or gender, but in this story, they represent the 'other.' They represent us. We close this longest night with the first glow of dawning in the east."

Kanagy said, "This experience has revealed the powerful interplay, or dance, between the scripture, the liturgy and the church seasons. We didn't intentionally link this to the Year of the Bible. And yet, just as stained-glass windows in earlier times told the gospel story to pre-literate people, art allows us to embody the words of the biblical narrative in ways that cause them to come alive in new ways."



Small congregation dreams big with God in San Antonio

by Laurie Oswald Robinson

Even though San Antonio (Texas) Mennonite Church is a small congregation, its recent decision to purchase the Mary and Martha House (*La Casa de María y Marta*) is helping the church dream big with God.

On Oct. 1, the 35-member congregation decided to buy the house – a block from the meetinghouse near downtown San Antonio -- from Mennonite Mission Network for \$180,000. The purchase will help the church to further develop some of the ministries that have operated for three decades at the residence that has served as a center for retreat, reflection and service.



the congregation to invite fellow Mennonites throughout Western District Conference and Mennonite Church USA to move forward with God, as well. La Casa will continue to house participants in Mission Network's SOOP program, which brings adults from across North America for volunteering at local non-profits. It will also continue to facilitate DOOR's Discover program where groups of mostly young people come for a week of service and learning. Still available, too, will be its guest house ministry, retreat and meeting space for various groups as well as temporary living space for church families in transition.

"Just as Mary sat at Jesus' feet to learn and reflect, and Martha was geared toward serving, we want this house to engage people with these values as they come looking for the face of God in our city," Epp Miller said.

For testimonies from La Casa, and for ways to partner with San Antonio Mennonite Church in these ministries, please visit their website: lacasa.sanantoniomennonite.org.

The pastor's heart

by Clarence Rempel, Conference Minister

Sing for the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth (Psalm 96:1). Paint for the Lord a new picture; paint for the Lord all you artists.

I believe God delights in Western District Conference congregations giving creative energy in glorifying God in new ways (New Creation). I believe God delights in visionary steps of faith that expand our capacity in congregational mission (San Antonio). I believe God delights in concentrated, shared engagement with God's transforming Word (Beatrice).

I urge us as disciples of Jesus to lean into our God-given call to glorify God and share the good news.

Sing to the Lord, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day. (Psalm 96:2).