Vine & Branches
THE PEOPLE OF PRAISE • “CHRIST IN YOU, THE HOPE OF GLORY.”

November 2006
$3.00

Breaking Ground
For the New River Ridge

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WE’RE BETTER IN COLOR

Brothers and Sisters,

We’ve heard the stories. The wife who hides the latest *Vine & Branches* so that she can finish reading it before her husband gets his hands on it. The branch member who calls around to see if he can “borrow a copy” because his copy hasn’t arrived yet. We know you like the full-color *Vine & Branches* because of the e-mails we get when a copy is lost in the mail. Next month will mark one year since we began publishing *Vine & Branches* in full color. As our anniversary approaches, we’re asking for your help.

It’s expensive to publish a monthly magazine. We’re very grateful for our many writers and photographers who volunteer—we couldn’t deliver without them—but our 2006-07 budget still totals $134,000. That covers the salary and health care costs for three part-time employees, one full-time worker and includes $30,000 in printing and mailing costs.

With 2006 drawing to a close and many people considering tax-deductible giving, I’d like to invite you to weigh the value of *Vine & Branches* to yourself and to the People of Praise. Would you consider giving us a donation that reflects our value to you? Your donation will help us cover our expenses and continue to improve our coverage.

As a token of our appreciation, for a $75 donation we’ll send a one-year gift subscription of *Vine & Branches* to the recipient you designate, perhaps a relative or a friend outside the community. For $150, we’ll send two subscriptions, and for $500, we’ll send five. Of course, we’ll gladly accept donations of any size. Please see the envelope in the middle of the magazine for further instructions on donating and Designating your gift subscription recipients.

Lastly, I’d like to thank you, our readers. Without you, there would be no stories worth writing and no color pictures worth printing. Thanks for making it worth the effort.

In Christ,
Sean Connolly
It was a moment of faith when the People of Praise sold the River Ridge facility last July. We had no firm future home for Trinity School, for Servant Branch offices or for the myriad of branch events regularly held at River Ridge. But the expansion of the Minneapolis-St. Paul airport made selling our home desirable and profitable, even if not perfectly safe. (See the August issue of Vine & Branches.)

Now the uncertainty and a two-year-long property search can finally be put to rest. On October 19, the community broke ground for a new, 100,000-square-foot school and branch center in the Twin Cities suburb of Eagan. Architectural drawings call for 30 classrooms, a two-station gym and an auxiliary gym, a wing of offices for Servant Branch staff, and an auditorium with enough space to seat 800 for branch events and school drama performances.

Did you catch all that? There’s more: enough parking for 300 cars, several Tuscan columns and arched windows, two large stories, and classrooms dedicated to the sciences—chemistry, physics and biology—as well as to music and art.

Kerry Koller, president of Trinity Schools, is excited about the possibilities for science and math in the new building. “A first-rate science and math education is an absolute essential for a 21st-century adult,” he says. “Technology is a key in this area, and the new building will give us many ways to use technology to further our science and math teaching.”

Head of School Bill Wacker is enthusiastic because all 30 classrooms will be excellent places to teach. Unlike at the old building, booming drama rehearsals and quiet Scripture discussions won’t be held in adjacent rooms, and none of the new classrooms will require students to form a single-file line to squeeze through the door like the old ones did. Bill highlights the diverse activities the new building will support. “In this beautiful building, we will be able to read the Aeneid in Latin, write computer code, sing beautiful music, study Scripture, discuss Homer, Plato, Dante and Dostoevsky, and down the hall tackle basic physics and even some special relativity.”

The 17-acre Eagan site is a nine-mile trek down Interstate 494 from the old site in Bloomington. (See
The Holy Spirit has been with us this whole time, leading and guiding us.

—Sam Claassen

map.) When construction is complete, the River Ridge name will migrate to Eagan along with the school and the branch. The new River Ridge building will stand at 2660 River Ridge Parkway, a road that has yet to be built.

“The first thing to understand about this new building is that our Father loves his sons and daughters in Servant Branch,” says Joel Kibler, principal branch coordinator, who helped tie down the sale of the old River Ridge site and our agreement with the Metropolitan Airports Commission. “There is no way the community would be able to afford this building apart from the Lord’s generosity.”

Joel says the building will open up many new possibilities for the branch. He points to the kitchen and the naturally lit, open commons area, which will seat up to 400 for large dinners, wedding receptions and Trinity School lunch hours. (An announcement about the new kitchen at a recent branch meeting drew spontaneous applause from the women, who have persevered for years in a counterless branch kitchen.) Utilizing the commons area and several large, multipurpose rooms, four or five area meetings can occur simultaneously in the building.

Construction will be completed in several stages, says Paul DeCelies (South Bend), who along with Sam Claassen (Servant Branch), Bill Rademacher (Servant Branch) and Clem Walters (South Bend) has oversight of the project on behalf of the board of governors of the People of Praise. Thanks to the sale of the old River Ridge, associated financial transactions and a building fund, we have $13 million to work with. Recently, Servant Branch member Jan Sweere pledged $3 million toward the new construction, giving us a total of $16 million for the new building—enough to complete the first stage of construction, Paul says.

“But we’re only going to spend money we have in hand,” he adds. “The $16 million is enough to make the school and branch offices fully functional. But we will need to raise more money to finish the gym, the auxiliary gym and the auditorium. These will first be built as unfinished shells, unless we raise enough money soon to finish them in the first stage.”

To help complete all the construction, the board of Trinity Schools, Inc. has hired a professional fundraiser, Tom Dunworth, of the California-based nonprofit development firm Dunworth & Associates. (See last month’s Vine & Branches.) Tom is overseeing Peg Louiselle, director

West elevation

—From left: Servant Branch members Joel Kibler, Jan Sweere and Sam Claassen.
of development for Trinity School at River Ridge, in an ambitious capital campaign.

As head of school, Bill Wacker will play a crucial role in the capital campaign. “It’s off to a superb start,” he says, “with the extremely generous $3 million pledge from Jan and, as I am very pleased to announce, the addition of Laurie Coleman as a campaign cochair.” Mrs. Coleman is the wife of U.S. Senator Norm Coleman and the parent of a Trinity School student.

“It’s a blessing for me to be able to support the new building for Trinity School and the People of Praise,” Jan says. She credits the People of Praise with helping her and her late husband, Harry, to decide in 1982 to start Ergotron, Inc. It’s a company that sells computer monitor stands and similar products. Jan says that she was able to make the pledge because of Ergotron’s financial success over the years. “This is something I know Harry would have wanted me to do.”

Talk of moving River Ridge began in the fall of 2004, and if you talk to anyone intimately acquainted with the project, you’ll hear about all the twists and turns, starts, stops and restarts, time estimates and cost projections associated with this project. The search committee, led by Jim Gearen, seriously considered four different sites in three different cities. Committee members have negotiated and worked closely with the Metropolitan Airports Commission, the city councils of Bloomington and Eagan, a large semiconductor company, a jazz pianist-turned-village-planner, a non-denominational church, several large real-estate-development companies, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, two architects, a myriad of lawyers and bankers—and that doesn’t count Gundlach Champion, the contract manager, and the many other contractors who will be working on construction.

The man charged with pinning down all interested parties was and remains Sam Claassen, a man who already spends his weekdays as the vice-president at Short Elliott Hendrickson, an architecture and engineering firm. Humbly, he calls himself “the chief cat-herder.” “Well,” responds Joel Kibler, “the cats are in the corral, and that’s largely thanks to Sam.” Clem explains, “Sam just has a really nice way of relating with people. He’s good with numbers and people!”

“The Holy Spirit has been with us this whole time, leading and guiding us,” Sam says. “My job has been to help get this thing done.”

And the job is getting done, with the efforts of Sam, Clem, Joel, Paul, Kerry, Jan, Bill Rademacher, Bill Wacker, the Holy Spirit and many others. In mid-October, earthmovers, backhoes and bulldozers began hauling dirt and working to flatten the new property’s rolling hills. Foundation work began in late October, and the construction schedule goes straight through the Minnesota winter, erecting the steel frame, enclosing the building with precast concrete walls, and, in the spring, beginning plumbing, electrical and HVAC work. Bill Rademacher is serving as the community’s construction manager.

School will open for the last time at the old River Ridge in the fall of 2007. The target date for students, teachers and branch members to occupy the new building is December 1, 2007.
Ten years ago a church congregation on Moore Road in Muncie disbanded and quietly sold their building. Residents of the Farmington neighborhood knew the property had changed hands, and probably noticed the new People of Praise sign out front, but they had no way of knowing that their new neighbors were an ecumenical community with a whole new way to live.

That changed this summer as Muncie brothers and sisters launched a Howdy, Neighbor campaign to increase their branch’s visibility. The 59-member branch inspired 35 new families to inquire about future gatherings. Now the branch has doubled its outreach budget and launched a fall campaign to pick up where the summer effort left off. “We’ve taken the wraps off our building and off the community itself,” Janet Spangler says.

Karl Benkeser, who led this summer’s big push to “go public,” says it began when his wife, Sandy, and Janet came home from last March’s Leaders’ Conference for Women itching to rethink the branch’s outreach strategy. “At our Lord’s Day table at the conference some women from Servant Branch talked about holding meetings in a neighborhood parking lot,” Janet recalls. “Using our center’s parking lot and highly visible front yard was something we could easily do.”

The story of Jerry and Linda Wright, who spent years looking for—but not finding—Christian community in Muncie, increased the impetus to get the word out about life in the branch. (For more on the Wrights’ story, see the July issue of Vine & Branches.) As Janet and Sandy’s enthusiasm spread, Muncie’s public meeting team morphed into a growth team and chose Farmington as their target.

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—Karl Benkeser

“Our goal,” says Karl, “was to introduce people in our neighborhood to Christ in the People of Praise.” Branch members mobilized to prepare for three summer events, placing 600 fliers inside neighborhood newspaper boxes. They rented a 4’ x 8’ marquee sign for the community center’s parking lot. The messages “Howdy, Neighbor” and “Y’All Come” blazoned a free picnic, a free ice cream social and a free back-to-school sloppy joe dinner.

So, the usually vacant front lawn of the People of Praise center became the setting for games, music, food and an opportunity for neighbors to meet the People of Praise. A leader opened each event by introducing everyone to the community. Then, later in the evening, community members stepped up to the microphone and offered testimonies. John Walker and others entertained everyone with music.

“Our branch is very gregarious,” says Karl. “It was beautiful to see people leapfrogging from table to table, greeting guests, making sure everyone registered, introducing themselves and making people welcome.”

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Branch members and guests carved pumpkins this fall at the home of John and Michelle Walker.

“Taking the wraps off community life.

Revealing Muncie’s Best Kept Secret

By Debbie Mixell

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guests seemed interested in returning for future community events. “One man and his wife had been looking for a prayer group but hadn’t found one that fit them,” he says. “Karl’s Clipboard” was a fixture, as he collected contact information. Twenty-six guests attended the picnic in June; 32 attended the ice cream social in July and 20 came to the sloppy joe dinner in August. All told, 35 families said they wanted to learn more about the People of Praise.

“This is still unfolding,” Karl says. Now that summer successes are behind them, the branch has launched their growth effort’s second phase. Their fall strategy is based on the experience of Larry and Rachel Attai, a recently underway couple who met the community through their daughter’s involvement in Girls of Praise. The team is planning a series of events targeting families and highlighting the Scouting program, the Girls of Praise and other opportunities for children. Branch members are issuing personal invitations to the folks who came to summer events. The growth team may purchase a marquee sign for their parking lot to make advertising more effective. They’re planning to produce a People of Praise fact sheet and to distribute copies of Vine & Branches.

One fall event has already drawn a crowd. More than 100 people attended a picnic at the home of John and Michelle Walker, even though it was outside the Farmington neighborhood. According to Michelle, the growth team has capitalized on one of the strengths of the branch. “As a body, we do a better job of inviting people to this kind of event than to public meetings,” she said. Janet Spangler echoes that assessment: “Why hadn’t we thought of this before? We can work with what we have.”

Walt Seale, who heads up growth efforts in the northern Virginia branch and has traveled around the community putting on growth seminars, commends the Muncie branch. “It is amazing to me just how little presence we occupy in our various locations. We might be the best-kept secret in our cities,” he says. “As our hearts turn outward to the world Christ wants redeemed, I think we will see new initiatives crop up that fit the local life of the branches.” Muncie is a good example of such an initiative. “It fits their life. They have a center located in a residential area, and they have viable programs for children. It’s doable and sustainable based on their situation.”

Maurice Valerio (New Orleans), who helped develop the growth seminar, says, “If the planned family nights are as powerful as the other events the branch has already held, I have no doubt the Lord will lead other families to the Muncie branch. People have witnessed God’s kingdom there alive and active.”

And so from now on Farmington residents can bet that the former church building on Moore Road—“the one with the People of Praise sign out front”—will never be called “quiet.”

**Karaline Bolka scoops out pumpkin seeds.**
Retirees Terry and Sue Schneider (Servant Branch) were sitting by the pool in Florida when a 30-something man named Kevin limped by. A year earlier, he’d had an erect and healthy bearing, but when they saw him last spring he was hunched over and struggling to sit down. Two of his vertebrae were out of alignment.

Terry invited him to drop by their condo that evening for prayer, and he did.

The next day, as Sue was sitting by the pool, a fast-talking woman called to her from across the fence. “Kevin’s telling everyone that he was totally healed last night,” she said. “Will you pray over me?” She wanted to stop smoking.

Later that day, another stranger asked for prayer, and by the end of the week eight people had come to the Schneiders’ for healing: for back and foot pain, breast cancer, sleeplessness, bad knees and lung fluid. A 90-year-old man got total relief from decades of back pain thanks to their prayers. He felt so good he played 18 holes of golf. His wife was healed of knee pain.

“It was just like in the Gospels,” Terry says. “We prayed with one person, and he spread the word.”

The requests didn’t stop when the Schneiders returned to Minnesota. A few weeks later, Barb, one of Sue’s friends from Florida, called. Her voice quavered as she explained that her son, Tim, had taken too many prescription pills and was in a coma, near death. Tim had struggled with alcoholism for years.

“The hospital was considering pulling the plug on him because they just didn’t think there was much hope of him coming out of it,” Sue recalls. She prayed for a complete healing.

Ten minutes after the call ended, the telephone rang again. Barb said the hospital had just called. Tim had moved his right arm and leg. The next day, he was sitting up and talking, and a few days later the hospital discharged him. Since then, he’s quit drinking, has been offered a new job, and he has suffered no residual effects from the overdose.

“You’re never on vacation from building the kingdom of God,” Sue says. “You’re always on call.”

In Mobile, Donna Ganzarain was sitting in her usual spot for morning mass, just down the wooden pew from Mary Clare. Mary Clare is a middle-aged woman Donna saw often enough to recognize that the frown and crinkled brow she wore during the service that day weren’t normal.

Afterward, as the 25 or so attendees headed toward the parking lot, Mary Clare pulled Donna aside. “I’ve got a problem, and I need your prayers,” she said. “It’s my brother.”

“Now, I didn’t know Mary Clare well, and I’d never even met her brother,” Donna recalls. “But all of a sudden I knew exactly what I needed to say. Your brother is an alcoholic, and you need to stop giving him money to support the habit.”

Surprised, Mary Clare explained that she and her brother had had an explosive argument that morning about money. Donna prayed with Mary Clare for courage, boldness and a reconciliation.

The next morning, Mary Clare pulled Donna aside again, this time with a sparkle in her eye. “I did it,” she said. “I went home and talked
In Colorado Springs, Jane Hrbacek was born with a heart murmur louder than any her nurse had ever heard. Inside of a week, she went from moderate to critical condition. The blood pressure in her right ventricle shot up to six times the normal level. Pat and Kara Hrbacek, her parents, rushed her to Denver for surgery.

“People were praying for us constantly,” Kara says. Word of Jane’s condition spread around the People of Praise via e-mail. “We talk about the body of Christ, and at that point it really hit home for me.”

The surgery brought Jane out of critical condition, but she spent the next two months breathing through a tube connected to her nose. She couldn’t survive without it.

When it was time for Jane’s baptism, Kevin Ranaghan (South Bend), a deacon in the Roman Catholic Church, flew to Colorado Springs, determined to heal her. In his sermon, he spoke boldly about life in the early church, when many believers were healed of physical ailments at their baptisms. In front of 100 guests, he claimed immediate healing for Jane.

A few hours later, Pat, Kara and Jane were sitting beneath the white fluorescent lights in the cardiologist’s office. The doctor removed Jane’s breathing tube to conduct some tests. Jane’s oxygen level, instead of plunging to a dangerously low level (as it normally did without the breathing tube), stayed at a safe 94%. It stayed there for an hour. The doctor told the Hrbaceks that the surgery two months earlier was supposed to have achieved similar results, but that it had failed. He wanted to know what had happened. When Pat and Kara told him about the baptism, he said, “Oh! That makes sense then. I believe in that!”

Kevin remembers getting news of the healing. “We were eating dinner at Eric and Mary Faith Hall’s home when the phone rang. Mary Faith answered it, and after a moment she started crying, but we could tell they were tears of joy. We all knew something had happened.”

Jane was supposed to have a second procedure a few weeks after her baptism, but her doctor cancelled it, and three weeks after her baptism she stopped using the breathing tube. Jane’s next doctor visit, for a routine check-up, is scheduled for February of 2007.

“I’ve just gotten bolder than I ever thought I’d be.”
—Donna Ganzarain

with him. It was the best conversation we’ve ever had.”

Donna’s word and her prayer brought about a turning point in the relationship between Mary Clare and her brother. Since that turn, Mary Clare’s brother has begun making better choices.

Mary Clare told everyone at their church about Donna, and others have asked Donna to pray with them: a woman nervous about an exam, a young man with family in war-torn Lebanon.

“I’ve just gotten bolder than I ever thought I’d be,” Donna says. “Ever since Maurice Valerio gave the growth seminar, God has opened me up, and I’m freer to free others.”

From left: Ruth, Kara, Ann, Pat and Jane Hrbacek
Good news on the ecumenical front! Three major church bodies—the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), the Roman Catholic Church and the World Methodist Council—have reached a consensus on one of the Reformation’s most formidable disagreements, the issue of justification. The statement, called the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ) is a rare victory in the tough, slow-moving field of formal ecumenical dialogue.

This summer, Lutheran and Roman Catholic leaders traveled to Seoul, South Korea, as official witnesses when leaders from the World Methodist Council added their signatures to the JDDJ. Lutheran and Roman Catholic leaders signed the document seven years ago in Augsburg, Germany, on the 482nd anniversary of the day when Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses and effectively began the Reformation.

Over 1.2 billion Christians—more than half the world’s Christian population, are represented in the new consensus. These Christians come from more than 200 churches and Christian denominations, including, in North America and the Caribbean, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the United Methodist Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

After nearly 500 years of disagreement and 40 years of formal theological dialogue, the leaders in Seoul were in high spirits:

“We have overcome a theological difference which has divided Western Christianity since the time of the Reformation,” said Rev. Ishmael Noko, general secretary of the Lutheran World Federation. “Now we must grow together in the mystery of our union with God, . . . for the renewal of our churches and for the healing of humanity.”

Cardinal Walter Kasper, head of the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, called July 26, the date of the WMC signing, “one of the most significant dates in the history of our churches.”

Pope Benedict XVI, who spoke to Methodist leaders last December, said the JDDJ was “a significant step towards the stated goal of full visible unity in faith.” Journalist John Allen, citing Lutheran sources, credits the pope, then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, with salvaging the JDDJ during a moment of apparent breakdown in 1998. “Without him we might not have an agreement,” said Bishop George Anderson, head of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

“\textit{We have overcome a theological difference which has divided Western Christianity since the time of the Reformation.}” —Rev. Ishmael Noko, general secretary of the Lutheran World Federation

Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Methodist leaders traveled to Seoul, South Korea, this summer where Methodists signed the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. Seated, from left: Rev. Sven Oppegaard (LWF), Rev. Ishmael Noko (LWF), Dr. George H. Freeman (WMC), His Eminence Sunday Mbang (WMC), Cardinal Walter Kasper (Roman Catholic) and Cardinal Kim Sou-Hwan (Roman Catholic).
Each of the 76 member churches of the World Methodist Council had to approve the JDDJ prior to the July signing. They did so unanimously. “We welcome the agreement with great joy,” they said in their official statement. “We declare that the common understanding of justification as it is outlined in the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification corresponds to Methodist doctrine.”

The question of justification—how a person is made righteous before God—has been a primary source of disagreement among many Christians. Historically, Lutherans have emphasized faith and God’s grace as the exclusive forces in justification, while Catholics have included a role for good works. The heart of the Joint Declaration is a single sentence that is significant because of the way it connects faith, grace and good works. It also serves as a summary of the new common understanding of justification: “Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ’s saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works.”

In the 16th century, Catholics and Lutherans formally condemned one another’s positions on justification. Remarkably, the declaration’s final section declares that these 16th-century condemnations do not apply to the new common understanding of justification, effectively revoking them.

“[T]he doctrinal condemnations of the 16th century . . . appear in a new light: The teaching of the Lutheran churches presented in this Declaration does not fall under the condemnations from the [Roman Catholic] Council of Trent. The condemnations in the Lutheran Confessions do not apply to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church presented in this Declaration.” (Emphasis added.)

The consensus expressed in the JDDJ does not apply to all Christians. Some church bodies, such as the World Council of Reformed Churches, are currently in dialogue with the signers of the JDDJ, and may choose to ratify the document in the future. Other groups openly oppose the JDDJ. The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, which is independent of the LWF and the second largest Lutheran denomination in North America, voices criticisms of the JDDJ on its web site, Faithforlife.com: “The JDDJ very carefully avoids precise definitions of the words grace, faith, sin, etc. . . . Careful definition of those terms would have shown how far apart our two churches actually are on the doctrine of justification.”

For the Catholics, Lutherans and Methodists who ratified the document, however, the JDDJ represents a milestone along the long road to Christian unity. While acknowledging substantial doctrinal disagreements yet to be overcome—in ecclesiology, church authority, the sacraments and other areas—leaders are optimistic that the spirit of the JDDJ will ultimately carry the day.

“We held out hands to each other as churches, and we do not wish to let go ever again,” Cardinal Kasper said.

“As we celebrate this important event today,” Rev. Noko told the audience in Seoul, “we should not see justification merely as a piece of theological doctrine but as an expression of the living gospel itself, which is nothing else than the living Christ present among us and within us. It has the richness of liberating and saving grace, by which we are reconciled to God and to one another.”

The JDDJ itself ends on an equally high and unifying note: “We give thanks to the Lord for this decisive step forward on the way to overcoming the division of the church. We ask the Holy Spirit to lead us further toward that visible unity which is Christ’s will.”

One Heart, One Mind

Celebrating 35 Years of People of Praise Ecumenism

By Bill Crimmins

“Praise the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, who inspires the body of Christ, unites it . . .”

—The Spirit and Purpose of the People of Praise

On a typical Sunday morning, Tom and Lynda Seasly of the South Bend branch rise, shower, breakfast, read the paper, dress for church, and then head off to services at Christ the King: Tom to Christ the King Roman Catholic Church, Lynda to Christ the King Lutheran Church. For over 20 years, the Seaslys’ marriage and family life have embodied one of the great and distinctive characteristics of the community—our charism for Christian unity, our ecumenical nature.

Tom and Lynda’s marital witness of ecumenism has not been without its difficulties. They agree that decisions about bringing up their children—their oldest daughter Charlotte was 11 months old before she was baptized as a Catholic—presented them with their greatest challenges. According to Tom, the success of their marriage and family “would have been impossible” without the support of brothers and sisters in the People of Praise.

The struggle can be lonely at times. Most weeks Lynda attends Lutheran services by herself, while Tom and the kids, all raised Roman Catholic, attend mass together. Still, Lynda says she is consoled in knowing that our Lord himself knew the pain of being alone. Moreover, she says, “I know the Lord wants me and my family in the community, so we make it work.” Though it sometimes means sacrifice, she says, with a touch of Swedish stoicism, that “blessings come from sacrifice,” and she agrees that the sense of longing that comes from worshiping apart instills in her an even greater desire for Christian unity.

“Love is even more important than theological agreement.”

—Paul DeCelles

The 29 brothers and sisters who made the covenant of the People of Praise on October 15, 1971, included 28 Roman Catholics and one heroic Methodist, Bob Oleson, giving the community an ecumenical character from the beginning. In fact, from before the beginning. This is due in large part, according to Kevin Ranaghan, to the ecumenical milieu out of which the community emerged. The swirling currents of the Catholic charismatic renewal and the Pentecostal movement were ecumenical at a time—the 1960s—when American Christianity was more open than today to interdenominational worship.

Tom and Lynda Seasly

Patricia Brewer
Paul recalls that in the early days of the Catholic Pentecostal movement, referring to the fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit beginning in 1967, he and Jeanne would sometimes answer the doorbell and find a stranger asking to be baptized in the Holy Spirit. "Who were we to deny them prayer for the Holy Spirit when they came to us to find him? It never occurred to us to ask, 'Are you Catholic?' because love is even more important than theological agreement.” Christians of many denominations attended prayer meetings together in South Bend and many other places during those years.

For the community to have become a solely Roman Catholic enterprise, "we would have had to exclude people," Kevin recalls. He describes a communitywide consultation held in the early '70s among the 80 to 90 members then covenanted. They considered the question of whether or not the People of Praise should continue as an ecumenical body. The affirmative answer confirmed our ecumenism as “not only de facto, but intentional as well.”

due to the doctrinal differences of our churches. Harold says that his experience of Christianity has been enriched in a myriad of men’s groups (one of which he described as having “three Catholics, one Baptist, and two mostly Lutheran”) by the chance to “walk up to the edge of the chasm” with his brothers in Christ. “Nothing is taboo,” he says of his men’s group conversations, because of “our experience together and trust of one another.”

Harold’s zeal for ecumenism led him to initiate a conversation on the citybuilder.org web site three months ago. (See last month’s Vine & Branches for more on citybuilder.org.) He says he started the thread because he wanted to find out what the under-30 crowd in the community thought about our ecumenical character. Responses poured in as both new and veteran members of the community weighed in on the importance of the community’s ecumenism in the 21st century. “The reason I joined the People of Praise,” one recently underway member wrote, is “its ecumenical nature.” Aware that anytime the Lord is doing something new opposition is sure to follow, the participant writes, “We get weird looks from everybody for it [our ecumenism].” The exchange—the most active thread on the forum—continues to this day, adding to the evidence that Kevin’s assertion applies just as much to today as it does to the community’s early days 35 years ago: "The People of Praise is a prophetic witness that Christian unity is possible.”
When 14-year-old Charlie Fraga entered a Franciscan seminary in California he couldn’t have known that he was embarking upon a life of Christian mission that would take him across the country and back, building a charismatic Christian community.

Later, during his freshman year at the University of San Francisco, Charlie met philosophy faculty member Kerry Koller and learned about the charismatic renewal. “Right from the beginning I knew that Charlie was a smart and interesting guy,” Kerry recalls. “It was also apparent that he was enormously creative and a real leader.” Seeing the Lord at work, Charlie joined the group that eventually became the John the Baptist Charismatic Renewal Community in San Francisco, and led their outreach efforts in northern California and the Northwest. He also met and married Carmen, his wife of 32 years.

In 1977 John the Baptist Charismatic Renewal Community moved to South Bend to join the People of Praise, with Charlie supervising the travel arrangements. After five years in the South Bend branch, Charlie and Carmen were asked to move to northern Virginia for a year to lead a group of 15 adults in founding a new branch of the People of Praise. They didn’t leave until their 2003 move to the Vancouver/Portland branch. During their 21 years in the northern Virginia branch (for 18 of which Charlie served as principal branch coordinator) the branch grew to become the third largest in the People of Praise, opened a campus of Trinity School, and sent out many members to the new branch in Tampa, a branch over which Charlie would have pastoral oversight.

In 1984, Charlie started Direct Development, Inc. Beginning as a fundraising venture, Direct Development evolved into a full-service direct-mail marketing company whose clients now include Trinity Schools, the College of William and Mary, the city of Falls Church, Virginia, and Vine & Branches. He has opened an office of Direct Development in Portland and now employs nine community members and two friends of the community.

Since their return to the West Coast, Charlie and Carmen have spearheaded the growth efforts of the Vancouver/Portland branch. After sharing the People of Praise with—and being politely rejected by—over 100 middle-class Portlanders (“people just like us,” says Charlie), they followed the Lord’s call to reach out to the city’s Hispanic population. Aided by Charlie and Carmen’s fluency in Spanish, three Hispanic couples and two Hispanic singles have come underway in the branch. One couple said they rejoiced at finally finding in the People of Praise the replacement family they had sought since entering the United States 18 years ago.

Looking to the future, Charlie eagerly anticipates helping the continued growth of the People of Praise both in numbers and in robustness as more community members get involved in city-building work. At present, Charlie and Carmen continue to build up the life of the Vancouver/Portland branch with their gift for hospitality: hosting many parties, Lord’s Days and spontaneous gatherings. Charlie says Carmen’s heart for other people inspires and balances his talents in planning and strategizing. “She’s a cheerleader who bubbles over with love.” The Fragas plan to continue their efforts to spread the life of the People of Praise, both through outreach to Portland’s Hispanic population and with a variety of city-building efforts in North Portland and in Vancouver. (For more on city-building in Portland, see the May-June issue of Vine & Branches.)

As they continue to serve the community, Charlie is as joyful as ever. “My passion in life is building Christian community,” he says. “I’m having tons of fun doing it with so many eager brothers and sisters.”
Phil and Monique DeLee (Michawaka, IN) have announced glad tidings, the birth of Joseph Matthew on September 11.

Shane and Diane Drefcinski (Platteville, WI) are rejoicing over the birth of Benedict James, born on August 7.

Michael and Amie Altendorf (St. Paul) are celebrating the blessed arrival of James Robert, born on August 19.

Andy and Ruth Grams (St. Paul) have happily announced the birth of Benjamin Andrew on September 14.

Dave, Jr., and Maggie Temeles (Annandale, VA) gladly welcomed Nathaniel Carl into their growing family on October 15.

From the Executive Office

Congratulations to the following members of the community, who recently made the covenant of the People of Praise:

Colorado Springs, September 17, 2006:
Jonathan Grams

Northern Virginia, October 15, 2006:
Mark Mullen

Servant Branch, September 17, 2006:
Jen Balsbaugh
Jon Balsbaugh
Sarah Coleman
Anastasia Evans
Dan Ficker
Hugh Springer, Jr.
Jen Torma

South Bend, October 15, 2006:
Nathan Barrett
Elizabeth Brewer
Catherine Grill
David Salmon
David Zimmel

Corvallis:
Sally Aman, Jean Monaco and Barbara Potts were elected to serve for three-year terms as handmaids, effective August 31, 2006.

Servant Branch:
Elizabeth Sanford was released from the covenant of the People of Praise on September 25, 2006.

Shreveport:
Dale Edwards was released from the covenant of the People of Praise on September 28, 2006.

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Front cover photo: Tom Bowar
Back cover graphic: Short Elliott Hendrickson, Inc.
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“Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that thou hast brought me thus far?” (2 Samuel 7:18).