

The Gifts of Diversity

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The Acts of the Apostles tell us that the group of people that returned to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives after the Ascension consisted of 11 Apostles (each named individually), “some women, Mary, the mother of Jesus, and his brothers” (Acts 1:14). All of these individuals, who together made up the first Church, had been witnesses to the ministry, passion, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. As such, they all witnessed the same the miracles of healing and signs of the reign of God being established, all heard the same parables and pronouncements, all watched the horror of his last day, and all experienced the peace and forgiveness that told them he was risen. Yet, no two of them had the same experience of Jesus.

As they gathered waiting for the promise of the Spirit’s coming to be fulfilled, they must have shared their own cherished memories of Jesus and their own personal experience of being stretched, shaped and formed into disciples. Like any group with shared experience, they would have undoubtedly discovered how differently each one of them saw him, heard him, remembered him and loved him. After all, only one of them loved him as a mother can love her son. Some, but not all, loved him as their brother. Others loved him as their rescuer from slavery, sickness, oppression and sin. In all likelihood, some, but not all, had experienced strong romantic and sexual feelings for him. As this first Church waited for the Spirit to send them to the ends of the earth, they first had to teach and learn from each other that their own personal experience of Jesus was painfully limited and short-sighted. Only when they could hear the variety and diversity of experiences of Jesus could they begin to grasp the awesomeness of his self-gift to us and the expansiveness and inclusiveness of his love for us. Without that bigger picture that could be grasped only by listening with profound respect to the experiences of others different than their own, this first Church only would have been able to offer the world a Christ much smaller than the one they showed us.

Cynically, one could say that this first experience of Church was the last one of its kind. Sadly perhaps, we wish that the Church could again open its collective ears and eyes to hear the incredible diversity of its members' experiences of God and wonder what freedom and grace might be ours as a result. Optimistically, we do notice every now and then the beauty of God’s tapestry woven from people of every race, language and way of life.

At Southdown we are blessed with the opportunity to see this tapestry and to experience the transforming healing grace that comes from it. The membership of the Church gathered here changes regularly and frequently, but it is consistently comprised of both women and men of many races, ethnicities, cultures and languages. The one common experience of the members of the Church gathered here is the experience of brokenness and the desire for healing. None of the members have been broken in the same way and none experience healing in the same way.

Southdown first opened its doors to women in the mid 1970's at the request of the Canadian Religious Conference. Expansion of the residential facilities in the mid 1980's allowed men and women to share life as well as treatment with one other. Over and over again, this arrangement has shown us that men and women, different as they are in the way they experience themselves, the world and God, can bring healing to each other in ways that far outshine their ability to hurt each other.

It is in this spirit that we offer this issue of the Covenant. We wanted to draw special attention to the experiences, wisdom and voices of the women of Church gathered here. We wanted to highlight them, not separate them from all the other voices here, so that we might be able to hear something from them that we might otherwise miss and so deprive ourselves of deeper, richer and broader knowledge of God.