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[My Tears Have Become My Bread](#) by Joshua Birk, Detroit, Michigan, USA

Why does it hurt us so when we fail to receive this intangible, indescribable thing we call “love”?

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Living Bulwark is committed to fostering renewal of the whole Christian people: Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox. We especially want to give witness to the charismatic, ecumenical, evangelistic, and community dimensions of that renewal. Living Bulwark seeks to equip Christians to grow in holiness, to apply Christian teaching to their lives, and to respond with faith and generosity to the working of the Holy Spirit in our day.

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publishing address: Park Royal Business Centre, 9-17 Park Royal Road, Suite 108, London NW10 7LQ, United Kingdom
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"My Tears Have Become My Bread"

Why does it hurt us so when we fail to receive this intangible, indescribable thing we call "love"?

by Joshua Birk

illustration by Detroit artist, Garrett Shireman

***My tears have become my bread,
By night, by day,
As I hear it said all the day long:
"Where is your God?"***

A piece of inner-city tumbleweed rolled in front of me, but I did not let the empty potato chip bag break my stride. I was a man on a mission. It was my first day as a youth worker in Detroit, and I was determined to make a good impression on the first kid I was going to meet.

I walked up the cement steps and gave the front door a confident knock. A shirtless, sinewy man answered the door. To say he invited me in would betray the word, but I stepped inside nonetheless. He closed the door and I took a few steps forward. I looked around the cheaply constructed condo and the confidence I had summoned quickly vanished. As an upper-middle class white kid, I quickly realized I was out of my element.

There were five or six people in the tiny living room, three on the couch watching television and the rest wandering around looking for nothing in particular. The wall had a few personal photos and magazine pages thumb-tacked to it in lieu of paintings or framed pictures. Other than that, the room was quite bare. It might have been messier if they had been able to afford more clothes or furniture. The kitchen might have been a bit dirtier, too, if they had food with which to dirty the dishes. But neither was the case.

A cute little girl with a dirty t-shirt was wedged between two women on the couch. The beads in her braided hair clicked together as she shot me a smile and then turned her head quickly away. Someone hollered and she went running into the kitchen.

My stomach turned as she got up. The voice had yelled a word I knew to be sexual innuendo, and she had answered to it as if it was her name.

In that moment, I was struck by the gravity of her situation. I had heard a brief synopsis of her “family” life. Drug use, drug dealing, unemployment, poverty, theft, and prison were not uncommon themes. But her story went from fiction to reality in mind as I heard an innocent six-year old girl being beckoned by a sexual nickname. How did any child deserve such a life?

Within my first week there, I heard stories that would give trendy atheist intellectuals like Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins enough ammo to last them through their next trip around the Ivy League lecture circuit. What ammo might they garner from the stories, you might ask? Pain and suffering. Seemingly needless pain and suffering.



"Waiting to pass the time away" - photo by Don Schwager

Many people (including, in all likelihood, Dawkins and Hitchens) believe the problem of pain to be the most powerful objection to Christianity. A succinct version of it might go as follows: If God is both all-powerful and all-good, He would put an end to pain and suffering. But pain and suffering still exist. So either (a) God is not powerful enough to end pain and suffering or (b) God allows it to exist and is, therefore, not all-good. As such, the Christian

conception of God is a false one.

Indeed, the problem of pain is a substantial objection. Answers to it tend not to be quick and easy. But I think the force of the objection lies not in the power of its syllogism, but rather in the weight it places on people's hearts. The experiential quality of the problem of pain is where its strength lies. How often, for example, do you hear the objection from polytheism raised outside of academic circles? Probably rarely, if ever. Why? Because while people might understand that objection, most do not experience it. The more abstract and esoteric an argument is, the less likely it is to be effective on a large scale. Conversely, the more tangible an argument is, the more likely it is to be largely effective.

The suffering youth of Detroit might not be able to envision a philosophically coherent polytheistic world, but they all know the tears they have cried. Those tears are their strongest objection to accepting the Gospel. In the cries for mercy that have undoubtedly been made, youth from the projects ask the exact same question that the Ph.D.'s from the ivory towers ask, "If God is all-good, why does he allow pain and suffering?"



"No where to go" - photo of Detroit walkway by Don Schwager

That question seems to linger with me when I hear painful stories. I imagine the dark nights that many youth must endure, the many tears shed without a loving hand to wipe them away. But it is then that I realize the strongest response to the problem of pain lies in our tears. For through them, we know that love exists. Unbelief sheds no tears because it has no hope for love. A world created without purpose has nothing to grieve over. A world of cold calculations, whose inhabitants are subject only to unloving and uncaring scientific processes, cannot be disappointed.

Atheism has yet to explain away the existence of human love. For why does it hurt us so when we fail to receive this intangible, indescribable thing we call "love"? Can any other being be moved to tears by the words, "I love you"? Many attempts have been made to explain love in wholly evolutionary terminology, but don't all the waterworks seem a bit unnecessary?

Christianity, on the other hand, says God has instilled in us a distinctly human capacity to show love, and along with it, unique emotions. Its explanation puts us in a world which is both physical and spiritual. In this fallen world, man is living in incomplete union with a perfectly loving Creator and his fellow creation due to his own rebellion.

Now wouldn't that give him all the reason in the world to cry?

Stories of profound pain and suffering will continue to be played out. They will leave some almost unable to

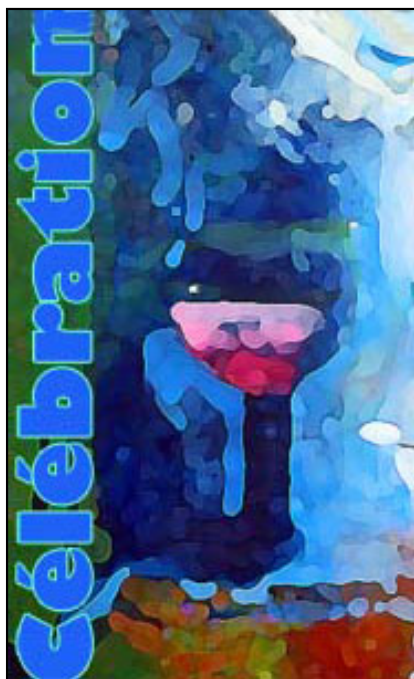
sympathize and they will leave others asking, “Where is your God?” Either way, the best Christian response is to love. It is both a question and an answer for the unbeliever. Moreover, it shows them that their tears should not be a source of despair, but a source of nourishment. For in those tears is love, and love is the food of the soul.

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publishing address: Park Royal Business Centre, 9-17 Park Royal Road, Suite 108, London NW10 7LQ, United Kingdom
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Feast or Famine?

***Have we lost our ability to feast?
And what can we do to recover this important
part of Christian culture?***

**Part one of a two-part series
by Bernhard Stock**

illustration by [Jamie Treadwell](#)

***Thus the heavens and the earth were finished,
and all the host of them.
And on the seventh day God finished his work
which he had done, and he rested on the seventh day
from all his work which he had done.
So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy.
(Genesis 2:1-3a)***

The Origin of Feasting

Right at the beginning of all, we see that God is active – he creates a vast universe. But then he finishes his work, and he establishes a day of rest – the seventh day, the Sabbath. Of course, this is not the end of God acting, as if, after this he has been just leaning back and watching what mankind does with his world.

This idea of God as a passive deity who no longer interferes with the world was, by the way, a theological position called Deism. Many Christians still think like Deists, as if God were no longer active – a mere philosophical principle. But God is still at work. He is a living God, who intervenes, acts in our lives, and speaks to us.

A Glorious Interruption

When God inaugurated the Sabbath, he actually interrupted his work and established a feast. And for us also, following his lead, a real feast is to be an interruption of day-to-day-life.

For there to be an interruption, there has to be something to interrupt – such as the normal day-to-day-life and activities, the hard work, the worries of life. We can only celebrate well and enjoy a feast if it is something special – something set-apart from the daily routine of life. And this means that people in our times, especially in the Western world, are in danger of losing our ability to celebrate. In a world where almost everything is special, where we can

live in material abundance, where we can have almost everything we want, and some people don't even have to work for it – in a world like this nothing becomes special. Can we who are wealthy by historical and current world standards really celebrate? No! If our lives are one ongoing party, in the long run, they become dull, shallow, and boring.

Sometimes I hear people complain about the work they have to do in preparing a celebration – the decoration, the cooking – but this is part of the real feast! It gives you all the more joy if at the end of all the work you can sit down and look around and say (like God did): behold, it is very good.

Eternal Roots in God

Scripture also teaches us that the genuine feasting has its origin in God – it has eternal roots. In fact, we cannot create a real feast. We cannot sit down and find a cause for celebrating and then celebrate. The cause of the real feast is already given to us. It's not something we achieve on our own.

All major feasts in the Jewish and Christian tradition have at their root something which God did – he delivered his people from Egypt, he gave the commandments, he sent his Son, and the Son, Jesus, rose from the dead, bringing us the promise of our own resurrection in him. We can see that as more feasts become secularized, they lose their eternal origin and meaning (some modern feasts don't even have an eternal origin), they lose their attraction and become distorted and perverted.

For example, Christmas is no longer a joyful celebration of our Savior's birth. It has been replaced as the "feast of the family" or, even worse, the "feast of giving gifts", and an "orgy of consumerism". The more man celebrates himself and his achievements (such as the mass celebrations which many communist and totalitarian regimes have put on each year), the more this becomes a mere flexing of muscle and less a real feast.

If a genuine feasting needs an eternal cause, we Christians should be the experts in celebrating, because we have more than enough reasons to celebrate. My personal conviction is that if Christians really learn to celebrate well, the people of this world will take notice and will want to learn from us how to celebrate the real feasts, such as Christmas. The world has lost the art of celebrating because it has lost the real cause for feasting.

In Next Month's Issue: [Part II - How should we celebrate?](#)

[Bernhard Stock, a gifted teacher and a founding leader of [Brot des Lebens](#) (Bread of Life Community) in Munich, Germany, is actively involved in community building work for the European region of the [Sword of the Spirit](#).]

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Gifts and Graces

***The Holy Spirit is the life-giver
(see 2 Corinthians 3:6).
But he does not just give us life;
he also works in us and through us.***

Part one of a three-part series

by Steve Clark

The “Breath” of God

We tend to think of the Spirit as being immaterial (a true statement) and therefore weaker, less substantial (a false one). Psalm 33:6-9 makes it clear that something spiritual is something powerful, something “charged with” the Spirit, who is the power of God:

By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth. He gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle; he put the deeps in storehouses.

Let all the earth fear the LORD, let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him! For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood forth.

The word Spirit is a translation of a Hebrew (and Greek) word that sometimes is translated “breath,” as in the above psalm, and at other times, “wind.” The Holy Spirit, then, is “the breath of his [God’s] mouth.”

There is an image behind the use of *word* and *spirit* as synonyms in this psalm. We can only speak a word when we breathe out. To speak, we breathe and form our breath into a sound of a certain sort. A word then comes into existence. The breath (spirit) gives the force or energy for the word to be spoken and heard. If you project your voice or shout, you realize this more quickly, because doing so takes more breath.

The word of God creates heaven and earth. Speaking of “the heavens ... and all their host ...” as well as “the earth ... and all the inhabitants of the world,” the psalm says, “He spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood forth.” In other words, by speaking a command, God created everything. His command contained the understanding of what he wanted to happen, which came from his wisdom or reason. His breath or spirit contained the force or power that brought it into existence. The Spirit with which he breathes his word is creative power itself.

Although seemingly insubstantial, wind can be very powerful. We can see something of this by considering a hurricane or tornado, both very strong winds. I was once staying with my mother when she lived close to Miami on Biscayne Boulevard. One evening a tornado decided to go north on Biscayne Boulevard. It touched down at three points and then headed out to sea. The next morning I went to one of the spots where it had landed and was impressed with how little it left of what once was a substantial building. The Scripture tells us that this is the kind of power that the “breath of God” has.

On the other hand, wind can have constructive effects. It can blow on a windmill and produce electricity or power a water pump. It can fill sails and move a boat across a great ocean. To get such results, we need the ability to receive the wind and apply its power to something useful.

Sometimes we use the phrase “charged with the Spirit.” Behind this is the image of an electrical wire. We can plug a cord into an appliance and nothing will happen. When, however, the other end of the cord is plugged into a socket, the cord is charged with electricity and brings electrical power into the appliance to enable it to function. Something charged with the Spirit is spiritually powerful and capable of getting spiritual results.

Spirit, then, is something forceful or powerful. The Holy Spirit, the holy breath of God or wind from God, brings with him God’s power. He enables what he enters into to operate with spiritual or divine power. That is why Jesus said in Acts 1:8, “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you,” and why Peter said in Acts 10:38, “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power.”

The Holy Spirit, however, is not naked power or brute force. He brings power accompanied by and formed by wisdom, because he is the power of God. As a consequence, he not only seeks to make our action more powerful, he also seeks to direct our action so that we know better what to do and how to do it. When the apostles wanted to choose what are sometimes described as the first deacons (servants), Peter said to the community, “Therefore, brethren, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom [or full of the Spirit of wisdom, the wisdom-bringing Spirit], whom we may appoint to this duty” (Acts 6:3). They were to look for men to whom the Holy Spirit had given wisdom, spiritually wise men. It is the combination of wisdom and power that forms human action and makes it effective and not chaotic or destructive, like that of an enraged man out of control. When we receive the Holy Spirit, then, he enters into us with wisdom and power, to equip us and work through us so that we can serve the kingdom of God in a more effective way.

[In Next Month's Issue: Part II - Gifts and Graces We Can Expect](#)

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Zacchaeus being called down from the tree - by [William Hole](#)

Zacchaeus and his Unexpected Dinner Guest

***what would you do if Jesus came to your house
for dinner?***

by Jeanne Kun

An unexpected encounter

When he awoke that morning, Zacchaeus could not have expected that he would entertain such an unusual guest in his home and relinquish half of his wealth — happily, at that — before the day was over! His encounter with Jesus was a surprising and life-changing one, and for years afterward, Zacchaeus — and all of Jericho with him — must have often recalled that memorable time when Jesus came to town.

Jesus, accompanied by his followers, was in Jericho on his way from Galilee to the Passover festival (and his death) in Jerusalem. Messianic fever ran high among the excited crowds who greeted him as he traveled to the holy city, attracted by his preaching and miracles. Could this be the Messiah, they wondered, come to deliver them from their

Roman oppressors?

A prosperous commercial and agricultural town in Jesus' day, Jericho is located near the end of the Jordan Valley, not far from the Dead Sea. From Jericho, the road begins its steep climb to Jerusalem. As Jesus entered the town, Zacchaeus, one of the district tax collectors, was eager to catch a glimpse of him. However, since he wasn't a tall man, he couldn't see over the heads of the crowd. So, quick-thinking and resourceful — qualities that had likely served him well in his lucrative profession — Zacchaeus ran ahead along Jesus' route and climbed a tree so he could get a good view of the teacher with a reputation for such amazing deeds.

Zacchaeus didn't worry that day about how undignified he looked nor did he care about what anyone else thought of him. Clearly his sole concern was to see Jesus, but we wonder what, in particular, motivated that desire. Was it idle curiosity to get a look at a miracle worker? Or was Zacchaeus moved by a longing for something worth far more than anything his money could buy?

Called a chief tax collector by Luke, Zacchaeus may have been Rome's "Internal Revenue Service supervisor" for the whole district, with other tax agents under him (Luke 19:2). Rights to collect public revenues within the provinces of the Roman Empire were auctioned off in Rome to financial companies. Frequently the bidder who won a contract then sold rights to collect taxes in various regions to smaller speculators, who often abused their positions by charging exorbitantly high rates. Consequently, tax collectors were unpopular. The Jews of Jericho would have especially despised Zacchaeus (Luke 19:7) because his job brought him into contact with "unclean" Gentiles and probably also required that he work on the sabbath. Moreover, he not only collected the taxes demanded by the Roman occupiers but defrauded his fellow townsmen to pad his own pocket (19:8).

Zacchaeus had shrewdly accumulated his wealth and enjoyed the material comforts it brought him. Was he, nonetheless, dissatisfied with his life? If he didn't care how foolish he appeared by climbing a tree to see Jesus, perhaps he was actually hoping for a personal encounter with this preacher whose words were known to cut to the heart.

"I must stay at your house today!"

Jesus' timing is perfect: He knows just the right hour to reach a heart that is longing for him. So he took the initiative, calling out: "Zacchaeus, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today" (Luke 19:5). When Jesus found this strange little man sitting up in a tree, he was like a shepherd searching for his wayward sheep. Just a short time before, Jesus had told this parable to the Pharisees who objected to his association with tax collectors and sinners (Luke 15:1-2):

What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost." (Luke 15:3-6)

In seeking out Zacchaeus, Jesus was also fulfilling God's own description of himself as Israel's "shepherd":

Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when some of his sheep have been scattered abroad, so will I seek out my sheep; and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. . . . I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the crippled, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will watch over; I will feed them in justice. (Ezekiel 34:11-12,16)

Jesus called out to Zacchaeus by name, just as a shepherd "calls his own sheep by name" (John 10:3). Had he heard the crowds shouting at the little man, mocking him as he sat so oddly perched in the sycamore? Or did Jesus know

Zacchaeus and his name by divine insight, just as he had “known” Natharuel sitting under the fig tree (1:47-48)? And Zacchaeus, like the sheep, recognized the voice of the shepherd (10:4).

It was Jesus who sought out Zacchaeus

Zacchaeus had climbed the tree and risked his reputation to see Jesus but, paradoxically, it was Jesus who sought out Zacchaeus. Jesus’ desire to be a guest in the tax collector’s home — “I must stay at your house today” (Luke 19:5) — reminds us of his invitation to all: “I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me” (Revelation 3:20).

Jesus didn’t confront Zacchaeus about his sins or ask him for an account of his shady business practices. Instead, he honoured Zacchaeus with request to be his guest. Touched by Jesus’ graciousness, the little tax collector acted quickly and decisively: He “made haste and came down” — no holding back on his part or wasting time! — “and received him joyfully” (Luke 19:6). Recognizing some special quality about this itinerant rabbi, Zacchaeus immediately brought him home. And with that spontaneous, eager response to Jesus, his life was radically transformed.

When the crowds grumbled that Jesus was entering the house of a sinner, was Zacchaeus embarrassed for the Lord’s sake? Perhaps he was ashamed and convicted that he was unworthy to receive this thoroughly good man who offered him his friendship. In any case, Zacchaeus was deeply moved by the Lord’s presence in his home and reformed his ways.

Zacchaeus not only publicly admitted his wrongdoing to his unexpected guest but also made his repentance concrete: He spontaneously announced that he would share half of his possessions with the poor and generously repay all those whom he had defrauded (Luke 19:8). In making fourfold restitution, Zacchaeus went far beyond the requirements of the Mosaic law regarding compensation for stolen goods (Leviticus 6:1-5; Numbers 5:5-7).

Affirming Zacchaeus’ repentance, Jesus declared: “Today salvation has come to this house” (Luke 19:9). Was there a surprised Mrs. Zacchaeus on the scene, and some startled children and house servants, too? Surely all the members of the household would have shared in the grace and blessings of Zacchaeus’ transformation, just as Cornelius’ entire household received salvation at his conversion (Acts 10:2; 11:14).

As Jesus carried out his mission “to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10), tax collectors and sinners were certainly among those whom he welcomed into his kingdom (Matthew 9:10-13; 21:31-32).

Questions for reflection

Are there any obstacles that stand in the way of your seeing Jesus clearly? What can you do to remove these obstacles and gain a better view and understanding of him?

How has your relationship with Jesus affected your “household” — your family, friends, coworkers, and neighbors? Does it give you hope that your own life can be transformed by a deeper personal encounter with the Lord?

See also, [Zacchaeus’ Tall Tale](#), a poem by Jeanne Kun.

[Jeanne Kun is a noted author and a senior woman leader in the [Word of Life Community](#), Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA. This article is excerpted from [My Lord and My God: A Scriptural Journey with the Followers of Jesus](#) by Jeanne Kun (Copyright © 2004 by The Word Among Us Press). Used with permission. This book can be purchased from [The Word Among Us Press](#).]

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Easter Tree - watercolor by [Jamie Treadwell](#)

Planted by His Kind Hands

Árbol de Vida Community celebrates its 30th Anniversary

By Claire de Mézerville



Árbol de Vida is an ecumenical Christian community located in San Jose, Costa Rica and a founding member community of the [Sword of the Spirit](#), an international ecumenical association of communities worldwide. This year is the 30th anniversary of **Árbol de Vida**. Claire de Mézerville, aged 25, has been an active participant of **Árbol de Vida** her whole life. In this article she highlights the early beginnings of the community and its growth.

*“Fue un pequeño árbol
que un día fue mirado por Dios Padre,
y en él pensó poner su amor insondable...
le regó y le cuidó con su mano amable.”*

*“It was a little tree
that one day was looked at by God the Father,
and he decided to place in it his unfathomable love...
He nurtured and took care of it with his kind hand.”*

Sowing seeds

The words above come from a song written by community members Marco Ulate and his wife, Lorena, a song especially composed for the 25th anniversary of the [Árbol de Vida](#) (Tree of Life) Christian Community. This year, 2007, our celebration reflects back on the 30 years that have witnessed: how we, a people of God, were born as believers and have grown into disciples, always maturing and changing, acknowledging our profound need for the grace of our Savior.

Costa Rica is a small country, with a population of about five million — more than half of whom live in the capital cities of its seven provinces. It is a land rich in volcanoes, beaches, mountains, and landscapes of exotic beauty, and a wonderful display of ecological life — which regrettably has not always been well taken care of. Our tropical land is populated by numerous fruit-bearing trees. Their abundant seed guarantee a fruitful harvest for generations to come.

When the Lord began a new work among us, he planted a spiritual seed in the hearts of a small group of young university students in San Jose. When they began to meet together for prayer and fellowship in 1976, the Lord gave them an image of a great seed-bearing tree. They saw, for the first time, their present and future story reflected in the metaphor of a tree that bears the fruit needed and craved by the people of their land. And this tree only bears fruit as long as it is nurtured by the streams of water that come from its Creator.



Members of [Árbol de Vida](#) gather regularly for praise and worship, teaching and sharing

Early roots

The story of our origins would be incomplete if we left out the account of how the Lord blessed our initial evangelistic efforts with the “Agape Café” (“agape” is the Greek term for Christian love). Agape Café was an outreach run by university students who shared the gospel openly with their guests. The outreach involved a variety of activities and events, including evangelistic camps held on one of Costa Rica’s mountains. It was through this initiative that the Lord began to prepare the soil where, in 1973, he would sow the seed of the Holy Spirit, when this group of believers was baptized in the Holy Spirit during a Pentecost experience where they opened their hearts and their minds to a charismatic way of worshiping their Lord.

That same year, a Costa Rican, Gastón de Mézerville, who was studying in Michigan State University in Lansing, Michigan, USA, became a member of what would later be the [Work of Christ Community](#) in Lansing. Through the letters exchanged between Gastón and the leadership of the “Agape” group in Costa Rica, the “Agape” began to learn about the covenant community call that was being lived out in the [Work of Christ Community](#), as well as in the Word of God Community in Ann Arbor.

On March 19, 1977, a young group of Costa Ricans from the “Agape” Group made their first community commitment to one another in San Jose, in response to a prophecy they had received a few months earlier:

I want to plant a tree in the midst of this city: a tree that will be nurtured with my water of life, to be always ready to bear the fruit that the city needs. To plant this tree, I need seeds that are willing to be sown into the ground and die. My calling is an invitation to be seeds in my Sower’s hands. If you surrender yourselves to me, willing to die in order to bring new life, I will take care of you as you grow, and see that you become a rich tree. I want to plant a tree in the midst of this city, and I want you to be my seeds (December 20th, 1976).

A community of disciples on mission

In 1979, now with 80 members, the community (which was originally named *Agape*) first entered into a community covenant with the Lord and with one another, as brothers and sisters in Christ. The following decade, the 80’s, would bring to the community a significant number of married couples and a new call regarding Christian family life. In the earliest years the community was mainly made up of single university students. With the years, community life grew richer through God’s call to include families and people of all ages (from babies and toddlers to elderly brothers and sisters) and from different walks of life.



In 1983, the *Agape Community* was one of the first few groups to become part of the [Sword of the Spirit](#). The community has pursued various expressions of Christian life together as part of the same goal — to be a community of disciples living the mission to follow Christ and to spread His light. A university outreach (CEM, “Christians on the March”) began in 1981. [The Servants of the Word](#), a missionary brotherhood of men living single for the Lord, established a household in 1986, which lasted for some years. And a program for young adults, named *Shalom*, has continued since 1987.

In the wake of our 10th anniversary, the community took on the name it now has, **Árbol de Vida**, which means “Tree of Life”. The prophecy given in December 1976 was not forgotten, and the new name continues to inspire all the members, and by God’s grace will do so for new members in the future as well.

The song composed during the 25th anniversary of **Árbol de Vida** keeps on saying:

*“Creció muy fuerte
abrigado por Su mano en la tormenta...”*

*“It grew strong,
sheltered by his hand during the storms...”*

And, only because of the mercy of our Lord has this tree endured storms...

New directions for growth

Although the 90's brought a new involvement of a number of **Árbol de Vida** leaders in the community-building effort in the Spanish-speaking region of the Sword of the Spirit, this was also a time of testing and conflict among the leadership of **Árbol de Vida**. The Lord's faithfulness was always present, although community life had begun to suffer. By 1996, with the help of other leaders from the Sword of the Spirit and the guidance received during visitations, the community was able to take the steps that eventually led to a resolution of the crisis. In February, 1997 the constitution of **Árbol de Vida** community was approved by the community's publicly committed members, a decision that brought new strength to this twenty-year-old tree.

The beginning of the 21st century gave **Árbol de Vida** new directions for growth — a new perspective to extend the hope of salvation — so much needed by our country and our region — expressed in various ministries of missionary outreach and new alternatives for evangelization. The construction of a community-owned facility for our gatherings was finally accomplished, and in April of 2001 **Árbol de Vida** was able to start gathering in a building of its own for the first time.

For Such a Time as This

Youth ministries have been invigorated due in large part to the inspiration of the “Ahora es Cuando” (“For Such a Time as This”) Youth Conference held in Acapulco, Mexico, in 2000 to receive the new millenium. In 2003, **Árbol de Vida** became a regional center for the youth outreaches of the Spanish-speaking region, a new challenge that was quickly followed by the regional summer internship programs called “Verano en Misión” (Summer in Mission). In 2006, after a time of prayer, **Árbol de Vida's** university Christian outreach, CEM, was reopened with new vigor and a fresh approach towards bringing the gospel to university students.

During the year 2005 an important campaign for evangelizing married couples was launched, and by the time the campaign ended more than 30 couples had made their initial commitments to our community.

I am 25 years old and have been a part of the community all my life. I have gotten to know people of various ages who met the community and became a part of this “tree”, and I have seen how the life that brings us together does not come from human efforts. We are all seeds, trying to die to ourselves in order to bring new life. We are all soil expecting God's holy work among us, and to quote the slogan of our 30th anniversary, we are all “witnesses of God's work.”

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publishing address: Park Royal Business Centre, 9-17 Park Royal Road, Suite 108, London NW10 7LQ, United Kingdom

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Students from Uganda with Emmaus Community leaders and Mission Team members - July 2007

Making a Difference in Uganda

university students meet for Christian leadership training

By Dallas Burkholder

Dallas, aged 23, is currently volunteering a year of missionary service based in London, UK, with the [Servants of the Word](#) and [Koinania](#), an evangelistic student outreach in London. Dallas grew up in the United States and comes from a Mennonite Christian background. He is a recent chemical engineering graduate of the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA, where he was actively involved for several years in student evangelism with [University Christian Outreach](#). Dallas here shares his recent mission trip experience meeting with Christian university students for a two-week training course held in Kampala, Uganda.

Meeting university students in Uganda

I have always held Christian missionaries in great awe. I've been inspired by the example of their godly lives and their eagerness to sacrifice the comforts of home and country for life-time service in mission lands. Well, I got my first taste of missionary work this past summer when I joined a Sword of the Spirit mission team trip to Uganda.

This past July, a mission team from the Sword of the Spirit was invited by Emmaus, a charismatic Christian community just north of the capital city of Kampala, to help them put on a two-week Christian leadership training program for university students from all over the country. The goal was to help the students become better leaders in their churches, prayer groups, and communities by providing them some training in how to do scripture study, grow in Christian character, and learn some practical leadership skills. The students there don't have normal challenges. As many are aware, this region suffers from ongoing war, poverty, disease, malnourishment and starvation. In view of Uganda's challenges, I wondered if our program could make a difference in such circumstances.



Dallas (bald headed guy in the center) with Sword of the Spirit Mission Team members and Emmaus Community Leaders

But the eagerness of those who came for training deeply encouraged me. As they eagerly absorbed everything we could say in the first few talks, I wondered if I really had anything more to offer them. It seemed that they had more to give me than I could give to them.



Dallas leading a student discussion group

Training in Christian discipleship and evangelism

As the first week progressed, the students discussed with us what they had been learning and experiencing in the training sessions. I was surprised to discover that much of what I had taken for granted as simple basic Christian teaching and principals was quite new to many of them. For many of the students this was the first time they had done any bible study. What a joy was in our hearts as we looked together at the scriptures and discussed ways they could create evangelistic environments for reaching out to other young people. While there was certainly joy in watching the students eagerly absorb and consider anything we had to give, there was also sorrow that, due in large part to lack of resources in the country, many were hearing these basic truths for the first time. I was filled with great gratitude for all the Christian teaching, upbringing, and spiritual guidance I had received. I felt very privileged to pass on what I had learned to other hungry learners.

In addition to providing teaching, the program also served as a place where prayer group leaders from around the country could meet with each other. Establishing strong relationships with other Christian students was very important for many attending the program because they lacked close supportive relationships with other Christians in their area. War and poverty had forced many of them to move around frequently and had prevented deep, long lasting friendships from forming. Furthering this problem was the lack of support many experienced from their

families. Many of the students had lost one or both of their parents to AIDS or other diseases. It was not uncommon for the fathers of the students to have more than one wife, and the students explained that many fathers did not provide their families with adequate support, either financial or spiritual. Many students struggled with loneliness and isolation. So the opportunity to connect with Christians in their region with similar hopes, dreams, struggles, and ideals as themselves was a huge blessing. Some even discovered they had fellow Christian students at their own university!



Emmaus Community youth celebrate with song and dance

Sowing seeds and laying groundwork

I left Uganda with a deeper understanding of physical and spiritual realities. The “big problems” such as war, poverty, disease, and the like are still there. They don’t seem to be disappearing anytime soon and I can definitely see the benefit of bringing as much material aid as possible to Africa. But many of the same problems that lead to suffering and loss of life seem also to be contributing to spiritual poverty and death. Isolation, discouragement, broken relationships, breakdown of moral values, and lack of Christian teaching seem to be just as impoverishing and life-threatening as hunger, malaria, and even AIDS.

I left Uganda knowing that I had learned many good things there, and I’m deeply grateful that I was able to pass on some spiritual truths and wisdom to Christian students in Uganda. I pray that the spiritual seeds and groundwork laid on this mission trip will yield some long-term fruit. I trust that God, who has begun a good work in these students, as well as in myself, will see it to completion. I pray and trust that the students who were able to attend this training program will pass on what they have learned to others as well. It was a great joy and blessing to have been available to serve my brothers and sisters in the Lord there. May he increase our generosity, not only in relieving physical suffering and material want wherever we can help, but also in providing for their spiritual needs.

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publishing address: Park Royal Business Centre, 9-17 Park Royal Road, Suite 108, London NW10 7LQ, United Kingdom
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A Spiritual Vision Welded

by Marianne Kantert



People

[by Marianne Kantert](#)

Sheet metal, gold leaves, welding,
height 78 cm

2007

Conceived in prayer – a vision takes form

During a time of prayer and worship at our ["Bread of Life"](#) spring community weekend I had a mental image or vision of hundreds of people drawn together and forming a large vessel reaching heavenward. I made a sketch of this image.

This vessel appeared to be filled with the light of God and the light was able to penetrate to the darker outside through gaps between the people.

I had the impression that this vessel represented the body of Christ - God's people, his church. Generations and generations of Christians have composed this body. It visually depicts how Christians are all inter-connected, those who came before us, those who are with us now, and those who will come after us. This trans-generational vessel connecting heaven and earth is built by God himself.



Rejoicing together in hope

Some weeks later, after I had sketched this vision, I was invited along with other artists to compose a piece of art for the gathering of 600 Christians from Europe and Lebanon for the [On Holiday](#) week together in Belgium this past August.

The theme of the week long event was: ["rejoicing together in hope – a taste of heaven"](#).

I felt intrigued and then the vision of a sculpture quickly came to my mind. In a flash I saw not just an idea or rough sketch, but the finished piece. I knew this is what I should create as a sculpture. The challenge was what technique to use.



Rejoicing in pain and suffering

Cutting the shapes of little figures out of a sheet of metal, literally hundreds of them, was a very tiring and exhausting work. My fingers hurt; and I got blisters on the palm of my hand.

It became quite boring and I had to be alert, not to just cut the metal in a mechanical, lifeless way, but to do it purposefully, always remembering the theme of our gathering: *rejoicing together in hope – a taste of heaven.*

Through prayer and adoration

After a period of tedious work I started to listen to Christian music as I continued to prepare the metal figures. The music lifted my spirit to praise God in thanks and adoration. The sculpting was no longer just boring and difficult, but part of the prayer. And I realised that this experience is actually what this sculpture is about: God's people, together, united by the light of God, through prayer and adoration, forming one body in Christ.

Being a Christian and being part of the body of Christ is not always easy or comfortable. Christian love includes sacrifice, toil, and sweat. Sometimes we feel exhausted, spent, and hurt. We get blisters and even bored sometimes.



But the challenges and struggles didn't stop me from pressing on with my work. For every disciple of Christ, the day-to-day challenges don't stop us from pressing on. Jesus is with us every step of the way.



Pairs are ready to be welded...



... to form a vessel



Detail of inside of "people"



Gold leaves let the inside of the sculpture glow

[See previous [article](#) by Marianne Kantert]

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Zacchaeus being called down from the tree - by [William Hole](#)

Zacchaeus' Tall Tale

poem by Jeanne Kun

Until Zacchaeus was visited so long ago
by saving grace in Jericho,
he'd known no joy nor satisfaction
in all that he'd possessed or wrongly gained.
Instead, he'd yearned for something he could not attain:
The sight of you, O Lord, eluded him,
for he was small of stature (and of heart).

But throwing off his dignity and pride,
he climbed the sycamore and
grew taller than he'd ever been before.
And from this new height,
he won his first glimpse of you.

Passing by that blessed tree,

you probed its leafy shelter with keen eyes;
and catching sight of the chief of tax collectors
perched (as if awaiting fate — or was it grace he hoped to meet there?)
so precariously in his post,
you stripped bare his soul
and looked into his longing.
Then suddenly sure with knowledge of his need,
you offered yourself to him as guest:

Zacchaeus, make haste and come down;
for I must stay at your house today.

Honored by such favor and request,
gladly did Zacchaeus descend
to be host and welcome you into his home and heart.
And as that humbled heart swelled great with generosity
in gratitude that you'd so gifted him with grace,
more gladly still did he give half his goods away
and repay fourfold his failings.
Yet far greater was the recompense that he received:
Since salvation came that happy day to him and all his house,
the little man's no longer stunted by his greed and ill-gotten gains.
Growing to full stature in you, O Lord,
Zacchaeus now stands straight and tall.

[Jeanne Kun is a noted author and a senior woman leader in the [Word of Life Community](#), Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA. Copyright © 2004 by Jeanne Kun. Used with permission. See related article: [Zacchaeus and his Unexpected Dinner Guest](#).]

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