

MESSENGER STUDYGUIDE

Food for thought, questions for discussion, and activities to help individuals, classes, and small groups use Messenger as a focus for study and reflection.

July/August 2006

Food for Thought: An Overview of the Issue

An interview with **Chris Raschka**, an artist and author of children's books, provides the cover and lead article. Marilyn Kieffaber writes "Have You Met Chris Raschka?" (pp. 10-12).

Commentaries on **stem cell research** are by Graydon Snyder, "Stem Cells: Present Help, Future Hope" (pp. 13-14), and Linda Dooly, "Stem Cell Research: Let's Keep It Ethical" (pp. 14-15).

"Not by Sight: Virlina's Mount Hermon Congregation Has Grown as It Walks by Faith," by Karen Doss Bowman (pp. 16-17) reviews **the growth of one congregation**. Side bars are on growth in Virlina District and Atlantic Southeast District.

"**Psalms**: Jerusalem's 'New Blue' Hymnal" is written by Stephen Breck Reid (pp. 18-19).

Activities: Connecting with the Content

Read Genesis 1:26-31. The Bible does not have much good to say about art, artists, or even the human imagination (see Exodus 32, Isaiah 41:29, for example) because of the connection between the creation of images and idol worship. **In a Bible commentary, read sections** relating to these passages from Genesis, Exodus, and Isaiah. **Write down your thoughts** about the role of imagination and creativity in faith. Why do the scriptures exhibit such distrust of human imagination and creativity? Why did God create humans with the capacity for creativity?

Read Genesis 1:26-31 again, in light of the commentaries on stem cell research. **Then read** the most recent newspaper or journal reports you can find about scientific developments in stem cell research or genetic engineering. **Write down a list of issues** that these readings bring up for you.

Read Isaiah 57:14-21. **Create a display** of your congregation's experiences with growth and loss over its history. Consult your church historian, librarian, or pastor for the historical details. Request access to church photo albums, minutes of church board and congregational business meetings, or other historical documents. To create the display, **start by making a timeline** of the congregation's history, noting times of growth and loss; **copy photos** of church groups and place them at appropriate spots on the timeline; **copy quotes from minutes** of the church board or congregational business meetings, to place at appropriate spots on the timeline illustrating the thinking of the time about the church's situation. Use the display in your congregation.

Read "memorable quotations" from the Psalms (p. 19): Psalm 8:2-5, 22:1, 23:1, 34:8, 46:10, 51:10, and 119:105. **Gather as many new and old hymnals** as you can find (be sure to include the "new blue" *Hymnal: A Worship Book*). Flip through each, noting differences in choice of hymns, presentation, language, and even style of musical notation. How many hymnals would have to be in the pew, for your congregation to be able to sing all of your favorite hymns?

Questions for Discussion

1. Borrow as many Raschka books as you can find at your community library or church library. Spend time reading the books and enjoying the illustrations. What do you like best about his work? What aspects or themes of his work may derive from his Brethren heritage? As a service project for the summer, consider buying a copy of each Raschka book for your church library.

2. In your discussion of stem cell research, refer to the Annual Conference statements related to issues of bioethics and medical technology (www.brethren.org/ac/ac_statements/87GeneticEngineering.html and www.brethren.org/ac/ac_statements/97GeneticEngineering.htm). Refer also to the draft policy on biotechnologies under development by the National Council of Churches (find a press release and links to document and study guide at www.ncccusa.org/news/051205TimelyBiotech.html). What scriptural foundations, and what ethical foundations undergird the documents? How do the documents express concern for human health and wellbeing, and concern to be guided by God?

3. What questions and concerns do you have about stem cell research? Have you faced a personal decision that might be affected by stem cell research, or by genetic engineering, or possibilities they present? If you are studying with a group, take time to share personal stories. Receive each story with respect, acknowledging that it may reflect a difficult time in the life of the person who is sharing, and may have had a serious impact on his or her life or the lives of loved ones.

4. If you made a display of your congregation's history of growth and loss (in the activities listed above) review the history revealed by the display. What factors have influenced your congregation's times of growth? What factors influenced times of loss?

5. Bowman writes about Mount Hermon that, "Perhaps the church's long and rich history gave members the confidence to take such a leap of faith" (p. 16). What aspects of your congregation's history give confidence to the membership today? How is your church exhibiting confidence in its current mission and ministries? What is the greatest strength of your congregation?

6. Reid encourages us not to focus on individual psalms, but to look more broadly at the book of Psalms as a whole. He suggests several different ways of understanding the structure and content of Psalms: What are the five collections or "books" in Psalms, and how can they be recognized? How can the Psalms be grouped by literary types? What worship process, or movement in worship, does this ancient hymnal pre-suppose? What was at the center of worship in ancient Israel, as opposed to the centrality of the sermon in current Protestant worship? How did Psalms re-frame previous worship traditions? How does Psalms reflect a communal process?

7. The Psalms move from laments, to good news, to conclude with "full-throated songs of praise," Reid writes (p. 19). To close your study, read aloud one of the psalms of lament, then read aloud a psalm of good news for the reader, and then finish by reading aloud a praise psalm.

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