

# 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.*

March 2008

## **Food for Thought: An Overview of the Issue**

*Messenger's* series for the **300th Anniversary of the Church of the Brethren** continues in this issue with articles on the period 1808-1858, and westward expansion by the Brethren. Features include "Sarah Righter Major: Preaching with Power" (pp. 8-9) by Pamela K. Brubaker; "The Wolves: Leading the Way West" (pp. 10-11) by James Benedict; and "Samuel Weir: African-American Preacher and Elder" (pp. 12-13) by Anna M. Speicher.

An article by James Benedict titled "**Following Christ on Pretty Feet**" (pp. 14-15) argues that the practice of love feast remains crucial to understanding Jesus.

The **Bible study on Mark** (pp. 18-19) is written by Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm.

## **Activities: Connecting with the Content**

**Read 2 Timothy 1:1-14. Research the life and work of Harriet Livermore**, credited for calling Sarah Righter Major to the ministry as a kind of "spiritual mother" to her. Look for books about early women preachers such as *Some Wild Visions: Autobiographies by Female Itinerant Evangelists in Nineteenth-Century America* by Elizabeth Elkin Grammer (Oxford University Press, 2003); *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845* by Catherine A. Brekus (University of North Carolina Press, 1998); or *The Gendered Pulpit: Preaching in American Protestant Spaces* by Roxanne Mountford (Southern Illinois University Press, 2003); or search for information about Harriet Livermore online at sites such as [www.seacoastnh.com/Famous\\_People/Link\\_Free\\_or\\_Die/Portrait\\_of\\_Harriet\\_Livermore](http://www.seacoastnh.com/Famous_People/Link_Free_or_Die/Portrait_of_Harriet_Livermore).

**Consider who is a "spiritual mother" to you.** As a prayer exercise, create a scrapbook page about that person. Head the page with her name, attach a photo if you have one, and write about how she has nourished you spiritually. Then pray and give thanks for her.

**Read John 13:1-17. Attend your congregation's spring love feast and write an account as if you are an observer from outside the church.** Love feast is traditionally held on the Thursday evening before Good Friday, this year on March 20. Describe how the congregation gathers, how the time of self examination is presented, how footwashing is done (do women and men wash separately, do you sing hymns during the footwashing, does your church practice the "single mode" or the "double mode"), who prepares the meal and what is served, do you eat in silence or converse, how communion is served, how clean up is carried out and who helps. Keep your account respectful, but include real-life observations as they may strike someone who is unfamiliar with the church. Offer your account to your pastor and the church newsletter editor.

## **Questions for Discussion**

1. Review the life and work of Sarah Righter Major, as told by Brubaker. What challenges did she pose for the church? How was she both rejected and accepted by the church? How were she

and her husband sensitive to those who did not accept her calling? Do you think their joint approach to ministry, and her willingness to be meek and humble, were helpful or hurtful to her?

2. How were Major and her husband involved with the movement to abolish slavery and the Underground Railroad? What connection do you see between Major's abolitionist work, and her personal experience as a woman rejected by the institutional church? How may a personal experience of rejection contribute to a person's work for justice for others?

3. Read the account on page 11 of issues that were controversial between the Far Western Brethren and the Brethren in the east, during the time of George Wolfe Jr.: universal restoration and the two modes of footwashing. Why were these controversial for the church? In your opinion, which of the two issues is most important, and why? Do issues like these prompt controversy in the church today? Make a list of issues that you think are most controversial in today's church. How did the Brethren of Wolfe's time come to a compromise and preserve unity? Looking over the list of current controversies, can a compromise be reached for each, and how?

4. Why is Samuel Weir described as "remarkable"? How did he experience both acceptance and rejection from the church? Weir must have had remarkable patience, endurance, and perseverance—in surviving slavery and separation from family, in learning to read as an adult, in ministering for 16 years before winning converts. How do you think he maintained faith and his calling, without giving way to despair? What personal lessons does he have to offer us today? What lessons may he offer the Church of the Brethren today, in a time of declining membership?

5. Why is it that "being antislavery in principle did not make Dunkers egalitarian in practice"? How did the Brethren of Weir's time demonstrate a conflict between principle and practice? Does the church today demonstrate conflicts of principle and practice, and how? Make a list of conflicts of principle and practice in the church today. How do such conflicts affect church members personally? Who may be hurt by such conflicts in the body of Christ? Do you think such conflicts express what Speicher calls "lingering prejudices," and why or why not?

6. Benedict writes that, "Some things in life simply cannot be adequately described in words alone. Experience is required for a full understanding." How is the experience of love feast different from reading a description? What can one learn from the physical experience of footwashing? How is washing a fellow Christian's feet crucial to understanding discipleship?

7. How does Mark proclaim "the power of God on the loose in the world"? Read Mark 8:27-38, and consider how the gospel describes the identity and power of Christ. How is that identity and power different from what readers expect? Describe the vision of God's kingdom in Mark, and the "messianic secret." Why is it important to "wait until we have witnessed Christ's crucifixion and resurrection before we share the gospel story with others"?

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