



# Religion Division

# “O sing to the Lord a new song”

– Psalm 96:1

When the Rev. Elizabeth Macaulay applied for admission to the Women Touched By Grace (WTBG) spiritual renewal program, she was facing daunting changes in her life. Her marriage of 23 years was ending, and she was relocating from Duluth, Minn., to South Minneapolis to lead the historic Richfield United Methodist Church. “I was moving from a city where I was a happy co-pastor and where my family and support system reside,” she recalls. “I was beginning life as a single mom of three grieving teens. I also was taking on another new role, that of senior pastor with a staff of 12. I went from rarely writing bills at home or church to tending the finances in both spheres.” She adds wryly, “May I say I was stressed?”

**The WTBG program offered** Macaulay a time to slow her pace and catch her breath. Administered by Our Lady of Grace Monastery near Indianapolis, it is one of more than 50 Endowment-funded programs designed to reinvigorate pastors so they return from brief sabbaticals refreshed and ready to continue leading vibrant congregations. The mid-career breaks are not conventional vacations but are periods of reflection and exploration aimed at sparking new enthusiasm for ministry.

“I don’t know that I could have stayed on as spiritual leader of a congregation without this program,” says Macaulay, who found herself on a Sunday evening in November 2003 at a sprawling retreat center in the company of 29 female pastors from diverse Protestant denominations. “I was greeted as long-lost kindred and swept into a strange world of quiet prayer and lavish hospitality. I decided early

on that I was there not to tend others – I was worn to nubbins by doing that on so many fronts – but to listen for God in the way I came to know as Benedictine.”

The idea of a Catholic community of nuns hosting a “time out” program for Protestant female pastors struck the nuns as a need that wasn’t being met. Although their church prohibits the ordination of women, the Benedictine sisters of Our Lady of Grace Monastery were sympathetic to the challenges that female clergy encounter. They knew that only 15 percent of mainline Protestant pastors are female and that women in ministry often have difficulty finding colleagues

*(OPPOSITE) Parting gift – Each member of the first class of the Women Touched By Grace program received a bluebird to remind them of their three years together.*



and mentors of their own gender. They also knew that the pressures of parish ministry frequently reduce the amount of time that clergy, male or female, can spend in prayer and reflection.

"It dawned on me that we could do something for these women because we're a women's group and we believe in women," says Sister Mary Luke Jones, project director of WTBG and administrator of the Benedict Inn Retreat and Conference Center on the monastery's campus. "The women of Our Lady of Grace are steeped in monastic prayer and religious disciplines that I believed many clergywomen of other denominations wish to embrace."

### **Striking the right balance**

The initiative that emerged was a blend of prayer, rest, exercise, learning and camaraderie. To be considered for admission to the WTBG program, an applicant had to have served in parish ministry for a minimum of five years and have the blessing of her congregation to travel to the retreat center for two 10-day sessions each year for three years. The culmination of the series was a pilgrimage to Italy in the fall of 2006. There, participants visited sites related to the life and ministry of St. Benedict, the fifth-century monk who founded 12 monasteries near Rome. "It wasn't my goal to turn these Protestant women into

Catholics or Benedictines," assures Sister Mary Luke. "But we realized that we have a wonderful legacy to share. We wanted to offer Benedictine hospitality."

The sisters announced the program through advertisements in a range of Protestant denominational publications. The grant stipulated 30 participants, but the ads generated 150 applications – all of them worthy, according to Sister Mary Luke. Members of an ecumenical selection committee agreed that the chosen pastors should represent a range of ages, faith traditions and geographic locations. They also looked for unusual characteristics. As an example, one successful applicant was based in an isolated area of Alaska and expressed a hunger for professional camaraderie. Another led canoe retreats in Canada. Still another was a gifted musician who used frame drums as part of worship. "We set a high bar," explains Sister Mary Luke, "and 30 of them bubbled up above the bar for one reason or another."

*(ABOVE) Sister Mary Luke Jones, WTBG project director and administrator of the Benedict Inn at Our Lady of Grace Monastery near Indianapolis, believes the Benedictine tradition of hospitality was a "natural" for the program that invited 30 Protestant women ministers for sessions over three years.*

As different as the applicants were, they all cited an interest in bonding with other women, making prayer a priority and enjoying a respite from the day-to-day demands of ministry. "I was interested in every facet of the program," says the Rev. Stacey Simpson Duke, who, with her husband, is co-pastor of First Baptist Church of Ann Arbor in Michigan. "As a university church, we tend toward the cerebral rather than the emotional, the spiritual or the expressive. Our church can be overly rational, which can stand in the way of spiritual vitality." She welcomed the opportunity to delve into "themes of spirituality, community and leadership" and to "live and pray with Benedictine sisters."

### Strength in numbers

As the series of semiannual retreats unfolded, the 30 pastors drew increasingly close. A participant from California so anticipated the sessions that she arranged to have a driver park her car in front of her church on the Sunday mornings that she was to fly to Indianapolis. As soon as she finished leading the worship service, she would jump into the car and dash to the airport. "They often arrived exhausted," says Sister Mary Luke, recalling the third gathering when one participant burst into the room, flattened herself against the wall and announced, "I love this place!"

Although the retreats were carefully planned, the group experienced its share of surprises. As they convened one evening in Rome at the end of the grant period, they tallied all the "significant, life-changing events" that had occurred in their three years together. The count: 28. Many happenings had been difficult — job losses, brushes with cancer, a family death, divorce — but one was especially joyous. Stacey Duke had announced to the group at its first session that she and her husband were expecting a baby. Six months later Duke arrived, eight months pregnant with twin boys and under strict doctor's orders to take it easy. The group hovered over her, relishing their roles as godmothers-in-waiting.

"The most powerful moment came on the last day of that session," recalls Duke. "We gathered in the Benedict Inn chapel, and the women had me sit in the middle of a circle. They laid hands on me and had a prayer. I felt such blessing, power and strength coming into me from that circle of women; it really carried me through the last four weeks of my pregnancy. It was wonderful to make the transition into motherhood while feeling so connected to a sisterhood."

As beneficial as the WTBG program was to the participating pas-

tors, so did it positively affect many of their congregations. Elizabeth Macaulay says, "My church is coming alive" and credits the revival in part to the personal renewal she experienced at the monastery. She cites aspects of the program that were most helpful — "the teaching of skilled theologians, the stunning beauty of two communities of women (the nuns and the pastors), the gift of time . . . and it has to be said, the gift of deep belly laughter."

Although the group has now officially disbanded, its 30 members continue to meet online in chat rooms. An Endowment grant, awarded this year, will support a second WTBG class and will provide for an annual gathering of the alumnae. Sister Mary Luke hopes the concept of ecumenical support for women in ministry will spread and that other faith communities will create similar projects. "Our dream is that this program will go on and on," she says.



**(RIGHT)** *The Rev. Teri Thomas of Northminster Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis participated in the first WTBG program. Wearing Indianapolis Colts-themed vestments she made (and carrying a "Chicago bear") she greeted parishioners and encouraged them to donate to the Souper Bowl of Caring.*

## A break in the action

A Religion Division renewal initiative of a different design has had continuous success since it was piloted in 1998. The Clergy Renewal Program (CRP) began in Indiana and expanded nationwide the following year. Like WTBG, the goal of the Indiana and national versions is to offer ordained clergy an opportunity to step away from daily parish life to rest, reflect or pursue a dream. Unlike WTBG, congregations and pastors participating in the CRP create one-of-a-kind sabbatical plans that are tailored to their specific interests. Grants of up to \$45,000 underwrite each pastor's activities during the sabbatical and cover the congregation's expense of supplying the pulpit in the minister's absence.

"Our church was entering a building phase, and I wanted to remain focused on Christ and the ministry of the church," recalls the Rev. Tom Hux, co-pastor of Our Savior's Lutheran Church in Salem, Ore., who spent part of his CRP sabbatical in South Africa. He feared that he might become so immersed in the practical matters of construction that he would lose touch with his spiritual mission. The opportunity to take a break to rest and reflect before the project's launch was appealing. "The timing seemed perfect to get energized as we entered into a period when it would be easy to get distracted," says Hux.

The highlight of his renewal program was a trip to South Africa where he reestablished a friendship that dated back to his seminary years. The Rev. Tshenuwani Farisani, an internationally known anti-apartheid leader, had been on faculty at Pacific Lutheran Theological

*The Rev. William Buchanan preaches and greets attendees at the 800-member Fifteenth Avenue Baptist Church near downtown Nashville, Tenn. Buchanan oversaw the remodeling of the church and the building of a new sanctuary. He has been pastor at the church since 1994; in 2002 the church was named one of the 300 best Protestant congregations in America.*

Seminary when Hux was a student. Now a key leader in his country's government, Farisani had invited Hux to experience life and ministry in South Africa. The Endowment grant enabled Hux not only to accept the invitation but also to bring with him his wife, Brenda, and their sons, Victor, Thomas and Luke.

"Pastor Farisani said he knew the best and the worst places to stay in South Africa, and he wanted us to experience the whole range," says Hux. "We stayed with families in very poor villages and saw life on their level. We visited prisons and torture centers, along with national parks and archaeological wonders. We met political and civic leaders, pastors, lay leaders and AIDS patients."

The adventure proved life-changing for the family and, in the end, for Hux's church. As part of the Endowment grant, Farisani and his wife traveled to Salem this January to speak at a church-sponsored event open to the community. Their presentation drew a record attendance for a guest speaker and resulted in the largest spontaneous gift ever collected. The funds are earmarked for repairs to the ministry site that Farisani directs in South Africa. But that was only the beginning. "Our congregation has pledged \$11,500 to send 20 of our members next summer to work with Pastor Farisani at the Church Center Beuster," says Hux. "The renewal program has been completed, yet its impact is alive and growing."

## Period of adjustment

Unlike Tom Hux, who scheduled his sabbatical before his church embarked on a building phase, the Rev. William F. Buchanan wanted to "clear my mind and reflect over my ministry" at the end of an exhausting renovation project. Buchanan served as onsite manager for the remodeling of the existing Fifteenth Avenue Baptist Church in Nashville, Tenn., and the addition of a new 1,000-seat sanctuary. "The project dominated my life for 13 months from construction to completion," he says. "It was time for renewal."



His congregation agreed. Several of its 800 members are professional educators who understand the concept of sabbaticals and encouraged him to apply for a CRP grant. Buchanan and the church created a proposal that had three components: travel with his family; a special program at the Harvard Summer Leadership Institute; and uninterrupted quiet time to study, reflect and write.

The “quiet time” proved most challenging to achieve. “We had just finished the building project, and we were still very much on a ‘high,’” he explains. “It probably took me a month or more to truly relax. Had I had more time between all the activity and my departure, I may have felt more emotionally prepared for the transition.”

Part of his preparation involved making sure all aspects of the church’s ministry were covered in his absence. Besides his pulpit duties, Buchanan oversees the church’s urban outreach efforts that include a feeding program for the homeless and a senior citizens group that meets twice weekly. In 1999 the congregation had established the Fifteenth Avenue Baptist Church Community Development Corp., and plans were underway to build an apartment complex and commercial facility.

A sabbatical team divided the various job assignments to ensure an uninterrupted flow in church business. Buchanan made one exception when he turned over his pastoral tasks to the team. Not wanting to disappoint the congregation’s graduating high school seniors, he delivered the traditional “charge” to the new graduates via a telephone hookup from Harvard. He and his family also occasionally worshipped at the home church, sitting in the pews among the members. “People would say, ‘Pastor, why are you here?’” he recalls. “I told them that there was no place that I would rather worship than at Fifteenth Avenue Baptist Church.”

In reflecting on his renewal experience, Buchanan cites a “side blessing” that he had not anticipated. Not only did the congregation support his three-month sabbatical, but it also made sure that the



church continued to advance while he was gone. Members adjusted their vacation schedules so the pews would be filled during worship. New lay leadership emerged, attendance and membership grew, and monetary giving increased.

“The sabbatical was a time that proved how God has blessed us with some very talented people,” concludes Buchanan. “The congregation now knows that even in the absence of the pastor, the church can still prosper, the church can still be vibrant, the church can still move on.”

