

for all our sisters out there— —a yearlong conversation among women

By Vicki Sairs, with additional reporting by Marina Lehman and Deborah Wagler

ROSEDALE

-- What would happen if women in the church decided to be honest with each other?

In July 2009 the executive committee of the sisters' fellowship of Conservative Mennonite Conference (CMC) asked themselves this question. To answer it, they launched *Among Women*, a project designed to bring women from different spheres together in open conversation from July 2010 through July 2011.

Phyllis Swartz, current moderator of the committee, explained the project's goals. "It's about decreasing confusion," she said. "We're over half the church and . . . we spend a lot of energy feeling confused by each other and suspicious of each other."

Women either put up their guard or are so careful of each other, she said, that their "energy doesn't go to God and his work."

The idea behind the project, said Phyllis, "is to gather a group of women who are strong enough to talk to each other and understand each other." These women will then take what they've learned and share it with the larger church at CMC's annual conference the last weekend in July.

"And it doesn't just end at conference," she said. The conversation will continue, "so we can move on to what we should be doing — praising God and helping each other grow and helping other people find God."

The nine *Among Women* participants represent single, divorced, and married women. Some stay home with their children, some have no children, and others are pursuing careers outside the home. Two are widows and one is a newcomer to the United States.

They gathered for weekend retreats last fall and in January and April of this year. Lynette Showalter, a licensed clinical social worker and experienced counselor, acted as facilitator.

At the first retreat, Lynette spoke to the women about her goals for the project. "Hopefully we can be a community of sisters to care for each other," she said. She also wanted each participant to experience a "measure of healing from God the healer."

Painting the bigger picture, she said that each person at the retreat represented a whole group of women. "And I like to think that we will go to the painful places and we will do the uncomfortable things for all our sisters out there, so that they know they're not alone."

Some of the painful places and uncomfortable things emerged right away. The women revisited these themes in the following two retreats, examining their experiences from different angles and sharing what they'd learned. The following are brief glimpses of some of the issues they dealt with. For more depth, please visit the blog at amongwomensmc.wordpress.com.

MOMMY WARS AND MOTHERS' HEARTS—Carla Hochstetler, assistant principal at an elementary school, wife, and mother of three young children, said, "I've used the phrase 'lonely island' when I talked about the sphere I'm representing because it seems in conference and in the church . . . there aren't a lot of professional, working women." She often feels misunderstood when she talks about her career and what God has called her to do.

People sometimes ask her if she really wants someone else raising her kids. "I don't love my children any less than anybody else," she said. "I totally feel like I am where I'm supposed to be . . . If he's called me, then he'll be with me on the journey."

Sabrina Lehman, also a mother of three young children, stays at home with her family. She came to the first retreat struggling with a sense of inadequacy. "I instantly felt inferior when I saw that [Carla] was a principal," she said. When the women met with each other for one-on-one sessions, Sabrina asked Carla to forgive her. "There's tension between our spheres," said Sabrina. "But God can call her to something and me to something and that's all right."

By the end of the first retreat, Carla expressed gratitude for the acceptance she felt among the women. She said that when she saw Sabrina was going to be there, she thought to herself, "Oh, no, another young mom . . . it's going to be in my face." But now she was thinking about this question: "What does it look like to walk the journey together, because we all just love Jesus. What does it look like?"

And at the third retreat, Sabrina was able to say: "We need to find that common ground to talk about. I don't know how to relate to your workday, but we both have mothers' hearts. We probably both have picky eaters."

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Charlotte Long, Vicki Sairs

THE BIG D – Elnora Miller, registered nurse and mother of two, announced that she would much rather represent single women or career women, because being a divorced woman is no longer her identity: “My identity is in Christ.” She agreed to do it because she knows “there are young hurting women out there who haven’t worked through” the pain of divorce.

Sometimes Christians don’t know how to respond to divorced people, she said. It hurt her when people assumed if she were just a better wife, it wouldn’t have happened. And in the first years, she had to be careful how she related to her friends’ husbands. “We need to talk to men sometimes when our car breaks down or something is broken in the house. Boundaries are still important. But women need to not be jealous of their husband talking to another woman unless it is emotional stuff.”

On the other hand, Elnora said her church (Maple City Chapel) and her small group were incredibly supportive. Men from the fellowship took her boys out to play and do guy things, and the church helped her financially during the hard times. Her small group encouraged her to pursue her dream of becoming a nurse.

Asked how the church can help divorced women, Elnora responded: “First and most important is helping that person heal on the spiritual level. It is such a delicate situation for the church. Help her to come to complete forgiveness of the spouse, herself, God, other people . . . It is easy for the hurting person to become defensive and feel like the church is trying to change them.”

WHY ISN’T A NICE PERSON LIKE YOU MARRIED – Mim Musser, director of human resources and prayer coordinator at Rosedale Mennonite Missions, has been asked this question. “How are you supposed to answer that?” she said.

At this point in her life (she is 62), Mim is able to look back and reflect on the turmoil that being single brought to her life. “It’s a joy,” she said, “to come to a place where I’m not mad at [God] anymore, where I don’t see it as a harsh punishment . . .”

But it took her a while to get to that place. Part of the problem was her own expectations. When she was a teenager she read John S. Kauffman’s biography. When it talked about his ordination, she thought, “That’s what God has for me. I’m going to be a pastor’s wife! This was really clear to me.”

For Mim, the hardest part of singleness has been answering this question: “What do you do with what you

think God called you to do and be when it doesn’t happen?”

One turning point in her struggle came when she discussed her desire to get married with a group of her peers, other grad students in a counseling practicum. “I’ll never forget,” said Mim. “One sister said, ‘Mim, you’re like a ship that’s left the anchor down, and it’s keeping you from moving.’ She was saying, ‘You have to die to it.’ The anchor was really cut that day.”

Mim still wanted a husband, but “something happened with that.” Years later, she was invited to share her story at a Rosedale Bible College chapel. She mentioned reading Kauffman’s book and having to give up the idea that being a pastor’s wife was her calling.

A week later, a brother from RBC sent her an email, saying, “Mim, look at who you are. Look at what you’ve done. *You* are the pastor!”

“And I thought, ‘Oh, maybe this was plan A all along, and I’m not in plan B anymore.’”

Over the years, Mim has enjoyed the flexibility she has, being able to travel and experience family in a unique way. She has been a part of many families; after all, she says, “It’s easy to fit one more plate on the table.” And she sees value in having come to terms with a life of singleness. It’s a joy to know that God “can handle the kicking and screaming and hollering.”

Yet new questions arise: When Mim’s mother was sick, her father was a model caregiver. “All of a sudden it struck me: well, who’s going to care for me when I’m dying?” It makes her sad, too, to think that she’ll never be a grandmother.

Her advice for churches is to be inclusive with single women, to recognize their talents and treat them as mature adults. Have a housewarming for singles who move into a new home; help them with their car; don’t consider it your mission to find all single people a spouse.

YOUR ARMS ARE ALWAYS EMPTY – Dot Chupp is elegant and stylish and has driven a Peterbilt truck across the country. She and her husband build custom sleepers that go on the back of semis. Dot said, “I don’t recall, like some women recall, wanting always to grow up and get married and . . . have three or four children or ten. That doesn’t mean we didn’t go through the stage of wanting to have children and knowing that wouldn’t be.”

Before they were married, she and her husband talked about what they might do if they couldn’t have children. Dot



Carla



Elnora



Mim



Dot

credits this with helping them deal with the reality when it happened.

Louella asked her, "Does it hurt when we talk about our children and grandchildren?" Dot's answer: "Yes, it hurts, but I really don't want you to stop talking about that. I love to hear the joys and the sorrow of that, and I also want to give you the freedom . . . so that I can share my joys with you."

More from Dot: "One thing not having children is like – your arms are always empty. . . I go through the stages – when you want to be a grandma, when you still want to hold babies. I would love to hold your babies as a grandma."

Another thing that troubles her: "An older woman came to me. I was in my forties, and she said, 'Well, it isn't too late. You could still have children – maybe you could pray about it.' It seemed to me that she just couldn't imagine that one could be fulfilled in marriage if you don't have children."

Turning to Mim, she said, "People can't imagine that you can be fulfilled in life if you aren't married, and that's not true."

GOD KEPT ASKING ME TO BE ODD – Naomi Byler introduced herself with a smile: I have six kids still at home, two in college, and four who are married." She smiled as she talked about how much she enjoys her season in life: "I enjoy my older married kids, my teenagers and my 7-year-old." And when the conversation turned to how crazy our lives can get, she asked, "Do we all at times go crazy doing the things we feel called to do?"

Naomi's good cheer is testimony to the healing and strength she has found in Jesus. She shared stories from her life: she grew up poor, with a father who was unbalanced and ultimately committed suicide; she lost her first love to a car accident; she was pulled out of school to work on the farm. Naomi always felt odd.

Her mother, however, was "a tower of strength," and Naomi experienced Jesus' comfort at an early age. When she was 11 or 12, her mom had to work and she felt very alone at home. "I was the oldest one at home. I thought it was because I'd sinned. I said, 'Jesus, I just have failed you so much.' He just filled my heart – his presence came down so heavy and sweet, and it was okay." Having twelve children and homeschooling them has added to her sense of being different, but these were choices she and her husband made together. They built a life together

centered on following Jesus and raising children to follow Jesus, too.

Sometimes people say things that hurt. If one of her children is struggling, some might suggest that if she didn't have so many children, perhaps that wouldn't happen. But she's come to realize that people's reactions can change from negative to positive, over time. "We need to give grace to people that have come to certain conclusions. We need to give grace to where people are."

Odd or not, Naomi spoke passionately about helping her children come to Jesus. So many different times, at different ages, when a child was going through something really painful, she was able to sit down with them, cry with them, and tell them she was sorry and that she understood. Then she could "lead them to Jesus where he was able to touch them in the very midst of their hurting . . . These are the most precious times."

YOU'RE JUST SO ENTWINED – Martha Stoltzfus and Louella Mast shared their experiences as widows. Martha's husband died in 2003; Louella lost her husband five years ago.

Martha said, "I followed my Lord into widowhood kicking and screaming . . . The first time I heard someone call me a widow was when I was staying at a hotel. And someone said, 'That's Wesley's widow.' And I thought, 'Is that who I am?' And of course, I am, but why did that hurt me so bad? Slowly, Wesley was omitted from that and now I'm just a widow."

Speaking of her own experience, Louella said, "God has been there." She looked at Martha and said, "We're not over it, are we, Martha? When it's the love of your life, you're just so entwined."

Martha said, "I have friends who'd like to fix me and make it better and make this thing go away, so I will not be an embarrassment to them. But this journey – you take it alone and you can't avoid it. You have to go through it. It can't be fixed, it can just be lived."

Both women agreed that they wanted to talk about their husbands. People think, 'But I wouldn't want to make them cry.' Their response: Go ahead. That is their reality, what makes them feel real.

"It is so healing to have somebody acknowledge that loss," said Louella. Martha said, "One of the song-leaders said the other night, 'I remember Wesley preaching on that.'" Little comments like that help, she said.



Naomi



Martha



Louella

Looking back, Martha said she was struck by how dependent she was on her husband. “Wesley was a big presence everywhere he went,” she said. “And I was very content to live in that shadow. I really was. And I did not want to be anything else. But the Lord has taught me . . . how to be . . . a person myself.”

“I LOVE THAT GOD HAS BEEN SO DEPENDABLE!” – Naomi Ndungu emigrated from Kenya to Ohio with her husband and three children in December 2009. She taught geography and economics to high school students for 22 years in Kenya and hopes to get back to teaching. Until then, she is working as a state-certified nurse aide in a hospice.

While Naomi is grateful for her new home and church, she misses family (especially her mother) and friends she left behind. “I thrive on relationships,” she said, “especially among women, my girlfriends [who] I can call and ask for prayer.” Although she is thankful for her Christian friends here, she feels keenly the absence of those deep connections, built up over the years.

Another pain, related to that lack of connection, is “being in an environment where you have to say or prove who and what you are. In Africa, we don’t talk a lot about ‘me, me, me.’ It’s an odd feeling to have to prove myself in words.”

So she’s had to learn to talk about herself. “It’s the only way out,” she said with a laugh.

But it’s not really a laughing matter. In Kenya, she held a position of respect and authority. She has a master’s degree in education, but the process of getting degrees, credential and

experience recognized in the States has been frustrating.

Discussing cultural differences, Naomi said, “The food is so different. We always ask, ‘what is this? What is this?’ It is all so different. We assume so much.”

Carla responded that “the church should be willing to explain our culture, but not assume that you want to assume our culture.”

“I think it is important to say, ‘If you want to,’” said Naomi.

What Naomi treasures most is the way that all this has drawn her closer to God. Proverbs 18:10 says that the name of the Lord is a strong tower for the shelter of the righteous. She is grateful, she said, “that the tower has doors in all directions for all those wounded in all fields.”

Continuing, she said, “I cannot trade this for anything. Knowing that I am in a time and a season when I must, I have no choice but to, lean on those everlasting arms . . . I love that God has been so dependable.”

By the time they met for their third retreat in April, the women were familiar with each other’s stories. Lehman said, “It has been humbling for me to see that it is a pride thing for me to judge others that I don’t understand. God has called us all to do something different. It’s easier to judge than try to understand, but God calls us all, and we do have a lot in common.” **BB**

To read more about what our women said and did during this year-long conversation, please do go to amongwomencmc.wordpress.com. And don’t forget to come to the women’s session at conference, on Friday, July 29th.

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