

DIVING INTO THE DEEP

Helen and John von Rohr die in January

Pacific School of Religion Professor Emeritus John von Rohr died on Jan. 31 in Portland, Ore. Jack's wife of 66 years, Helen von Rohr, died on Jan. 16.

Jack von Rohr taught church history at PSR from 1955 to 1982. He was PSR's Dean from 1967 to 1974 and served as acting president from 1977 to 1979. His book, "The Shaping of American Congregationalism, 1620-1957," remains a key text in the teaching of United Church of Christ history and polity. He also wrote "Profile of Protestantism" and "The Covenant of Grace in Puritan Thought."

Helen and Jack von Rohr met the summer after college as counselors at a Congregational Church camp in Minnesota. They married in June 1939 and lived in Chicago, where they both studied at Chicago Theological Seminary, and in Woodmont, Connecticut, while Jack worked on his Ph.D. at Yale University.

In 1945 they moved to Claremont, Calif., where Helen taught music and piano and Jack

taught religion and chaired the religion department at Pomona College. They moved to Berkeley after Jack took a faculty position at the PSR in 1955. Both were active members of First Congregational, Berkeley. They retired in Walnut Creek in 1982 and moved to Portland three years ago to be near family.

The von Rohrs are survived by their two children, Susan Scaff and Carl von Rohr; four grandchildren; and one great grandson. Susan Scaff is a member of Almaden Valley, San Jose.

Memorial services were held in February at Parkrose Community, Portland, and at First Congregational, Berkeley.

The family requests that remembrances be made to Adventist Health Hospice, c/o Adventist



Jack von Rohr

Medical Center, 10123 SE Market St., Portland, OR 97216.

Thanks to Susan Scaff and Pacific School of Religion for contributing to this tribute.

Thomas explores deeper meaning of the Extravagant Welcome advertisement

Editor's note: UCC General Minister and President John Thomas wrote a pastoral letter to the churches in January. Below is an excerpt. The full text can be read at <<http://www.ucc.org/news/record/thomas010505.htm>>

Dear Friends,

While on a silent retreat at the National Cathedral in Washington during the week following the public controversy over the refusal of the networks to air our television commercial, I encountered this prayer in the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace:

So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of your Name. Amen.

This prayer, mirroring the extravagant welcome of our commercial - "Jesus didn't turn people away; neither do we." - roots our message of hospitality in the person and passion of Christ, and invites us to a deeper reflection on the purpose of that welcome.

The attention the commercial controversy drew to our church provided a unique opportunity to speak the Gospel in an accent not often heard in our culture. Coming in the wake of a political season laced with commercials marked by deception and trading on fear, a message frequently echoed by the highly visible theology and values of the extreme religious and cultural right, our voice broadcast an often-silenced message of grace.

Hundreds of letters and emails received in response to the ad suggest that such a message was a source of profound and unexpected encouragement and hope to persons who have believed themselves to be outside the reach of Christ's outstretched arms and for whom the cross is experienced only as judgment, never as embrace.

Many who saw the ad took the further step of seeking out a United Church of Christ congregation. Over 137,000 people used the "find a church" feature at ucc.org or stillspeaking.com in December, compared with 5,700 in November.

I believe we have been given a unique opportunity to help recast the public debate over values in this country and to reshape the public perception of the nature and



John Thomas

purpose of Christian faith and Christian community. Seizing this opportunity will take courage, for resistance to our message is formidable, cutting

against the prevailing grain of a society frightened by the stranger, suspicious of difference, and easily seduced by appeals to a future secured with narrowly defined theological boundaries and well defended national borders. Living out the welcome promised in our ad will take commitment to continued growth in congregational cultures of hospitality. Taking advantage of this moment will require a level of generosity unprecedented in the United Church of Christ, for if the ad controversy taught us anything, it was the power of the media to thrust heretofore quiet voices and perspectives into amazing, almost unnerving prominence. . .

Our "God is still speaking" identity campaign is not just about getting our name more visible, or helping our people remember their heritage of "firsts," or joining in playful musings on the theology of "the comma," no matter how valuable and helpful these might be. And, as a "united and uniting church" for whom the ecumenical vocation is at the core of our identity, it cannot be our presumption that a distinctive Gospel voice makes us superior to others with their own distinctive and critical voice.

No, "God is still speaking" invites us and those who may join us to an identity that at the deepest level is a "putting on Christ," and therefore a process of repentance for those things in our lives that separate us from Christ.

. . . During Christmas the world witnessed the horror of destruction caused by the tsunami in Southern Asia and parts of Africa. We also witnessed the beginning of an outpouring of gifts from the United Church of Christ and our ecumenical partners, gifts that reflect the deep compassion of God. Once again we were reminded that vital responses to urgent need require vital churches deeply attentive to neighbors. Our hospitality ultimately must be a welcome to the consoling embrace of Christ.

The heart of prayer, prayers of the heart

Ten words, ten prayers

By Tim Nonn

Open my heart one beat, one breath, at a time.

Let me see with the eyes of the morning light.

Find a place for me to rest within your heart.

Surround me with silence even in the midst of sounds.

When I reach for your hand, open it in yours.

How happy are the lost and forgotten in your presence.

How happy are the poor, enslaved and imprisoned with liberation.

How happy are the children who trust in your promise.

How happy are those who feel your warmth and breath.

How happy are those who dance and sing with you.

Tim Nonn is a member of United, Petaluma. (The Pacific welcomes creative writing and art for this page. Send to <dstreeter@ncncucc.org>)



Editor's note: I finally read Marcus Borg's new book, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (San Francisco, Harper, 2003), after reading in so many of your NCNC church newsletters about study groups using this fine book. Hundreds of us have read this book! He quotes this prayer by Dag Hammarskjold, and it has become a favorite of mine. I say it over and over again as I walk.

Give us pure hearts, that we may see you.
Humble hearts, that we may hear you.
Hearts of love, that we may serve you.
Hearts of faith, that we may abide in you.