

June 2005, *Equipping*



A Buddhist Witness to the Christian Faith:

Recently I led a workshop at the Habitat for Humanity Canada annual meeting. The issue at hand was whether or not that organization should disconnect from its founding Christian roots and church. My task, thankfully, was not to resolve the issue but to present a framework that might be helpful for discussing the issue.

The Christian participants in the workshop were passionate. One by one, they made the case in favor of disconnecting. *'Times have changed since this organization was founded,'* said one. *'Our world isn't as simple as it was back then.'* *'The Christian gospel is far too limiting to work with persons of other faiths,'* said another. *'The church is a box, and we have to get out of the box to minister effectively,'* said another. *'We don't want to be exclusive. How can we invite others to join us if we're explicit about who we are and what we believe,'* said another. *'We don't need faith foundations to build houses. Why don't we just build houses and forget about this identity stuff,'* suggested yet another. It was clear to me that these arguments grew out of reduced understandings of the gospel and truncated experiences with the church.

Toward the end of the three hour workshop, a gentleman, who had been quietly attentive to the proceedings, humbly raised his hand. *'I am a Zen Buddhist,'* he began. *'I participate as an affiliate of Habitat. I am there because Habitat claims to have a strong foundation in the Christian faith. This sets it apart from other charitable organizations. If we want to set aside that foundation, my suggestion would be to convert Habitat into an advocacy organization, lobbying the government to build more houses for the poor. This would be more efficient and we could do a lot more than the meager 170 houses that Habitat built in Canada last year. But I think we need to do more than build houses. We need to be clear about our faith foundations because this provides hope to the beneficiaries. If the Christian gospel is as "the doctor" [a reference to me and my presentation] has articulated, I don't feel myself excluded by you. Your God is big enough to let you work with me. I would encourage Habitat to strengthen its foundations in the Christian faith. Or let me put it another way: if Habitat disconnects from the Christian faith, I will disconnect from Habitat.'*

There was hushed silence and then sustained applause. I had the impression that we had heard a word from God.

I have thought about that experience a lot since then. How difficult it seems to be for Christians to believe that the Christian gospel is exhilarating, expansive, far-reaching, and transforming. How difficult it is to believe that the church has a compelling role to play in God's dream to save the world from sin. I was shocked to hear one woman, who identified herself as an evangelical Christian, say that she was glad that the Girl Guides had finally moved from the exclusive and limiting foundation of the Christian gospel to a much broader foundation such as *'Canadian citizenship.'* *'Canadian citizenship broader than the Christian gospel,'* I thought to myself. *'Where does that understanding of gospel come from?'*

I come back from an experience like that with a strong sense that the church has failed. We have not succeeded in communicating the broad, dynamic, all-encompassing, energizing, and compelling purposes of the gospel for this needy world. And we have failed in forming communities of dynamic faith where such a gospel is lived out so that those within the community sense the transforming possibilities of this strategy of God, and those outside of these communities can watch and see the potential of the gospel lived out.

But I also come back energized, because it is exactly this badly needed agenda that we are trying to address in Mennonite Church Canada Witness, in Canada and around the world. I am energized and refreshed when I watch our staff at work – daily – patiently - and methodically putting in place opportunities for such reflection and learning to happen.

The Spirit is blowing refreshing winds over pessimistic human perspectives. We appreciate every opportunity to see and hear how the Spirit is transforming our lives, our churches, our communities and our world. We would love to hear from you. —*Robert J. Suderman, Executive Secretary, Witness*