

## *What is the Atlantic Baptist Fellowship?*

The Atlantic Baptist Fellowship was formed about thirty years ago by a group of Baptist lay people and ministers who conceived it as a way of pursuing certain converging interests. First, they wanted to witness to historical Baptist principles. They also wanted to be involved with non-Baptist communions in joint worship, social action and ecumenical discussions of the nature of the Church. Finally, they wished to create a safe and welcoming environment where Baptists can share concerns and points of view with out fear of being marginalized. The ABF is not an executive body, carrying out programs, and advocating positions. It is a consultative body with the following aims:

1. To witness to the freedom implicit in the voluntary principle in religion which is the essence of the traditional Baptist position;
2. To affirm and celebrate Baptist participation in, and witness to the whole, visible, catholic and evangelical church of Jesus Christ;
3. To strengthen the Convention of Atlantic Baptist Churches and to encourage it to strive for the above;
4. To provide a forum for the discussion of doctrinal and ethical questions and social problems and policies in that spirit of tolerance and mutual respect which issues from Christian love.

In pursuit of these aims the ABF publishes the *Bulletin*, and meets semiannually for worship, fellowship, and study of an issue of contemporary interest. Everyone is welcome to attend.

# THE BULLETIN

A P U B L I C A T I O N O F

## *Atlantic Baptist Fellowship*

W I N T E R 2 0 0 5



### *The Incarnation*

DETAIL FROM THE CHANCEL WINDOW  
MANNING MEMORIAL CHAPEL  
ACADIA UNIVERSITY



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## In This Issue

RODGER FORSMAN

Our cover photo, by Jacqueline Hiebert of Wolfville, evokes the theme of this issue. The Chancel Window in Manning Memorial Chapel consists of three lancets (each containing five vertically arrayed images) representing respectively the Old Testament story from the Garden of Eden up to the Incarnation, the New Testament story from the Baptism of Jesus up to the Resurrection, and the story of the Church from the Giving of the Holy Spirit up to—the Founding of Acadia University! Putting this last event on a visual par with the Incarnation and the Ascension isn't merely a piece of Baptist self-congratulation however! Instead it is an expression of the fundamental Christian conviction that God is at work in the world in ways that touch the lives of each and every creature capable of appreciating that fact. Indeed, the ways in which we all take up into ourselves the influences of other people—parents, friends, teachers—offer a very useful model for thinking about this central testimony of the Christian Story.

The Reverend Judith Gates' perceptive meditation on the Incarnation specifically challenges us to recognize and embrace God's saving work in and through the lives of each one of us. The Editor's reflections on stewardship seek to locate concerns about financing the work of the church in the context of the same kind of incarnational thinking. The Reverend Dr. Barry Morrison's, report on Baptist/Roman Catholic dialogue not only informs us of some of our ecumenical involvements but also reminds us that such discussions are really explorations of the ways in which God's grace is felt and exhibited in our lives, or, as we might say, incarnated in our experience.

Incarnation: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us...." (Jn 1:14) This sentence makes the astounding claim that our ultimate good is worked out in the midst of our day-to-day lives, not by mere fleshly means, but not without the flesh either; and this is a highly practical matter.

# *The Incarnation: God With Us*

JUDITH GATES

*Editor's Note: The Reverend Judith Gates is a resident of Port Williams, Nova Scotia. She has served Baptist congregations as minister, and is currently Chair of the Board of Ministerial Standards and Education.*

When you think of how the Incarnation might have happened ... in a blaze of glory and majesty so overwhelming that, like Moses, all must hide and only behold the lingering trail of God's entry into our world ... it makes us realize how restrained God was. A humble birthing place for humble parents; a choir of angels announcing the Good News—to shepherds of all people; a star for those who were seeking ... this was the Incarnation. I imagine most of those crowding into Bethlehem, maybe even those close by, never realized what was happening.

Mary, whose journey began in faithful surrender to God's will, pondered these wonders in her heart, lived with her doubts, was still there at the foot of the cross, and witnessed the resurrection.

Joseph, too, lived with both understanding and uncertainty. His obedience to the life he was called to live provided the "cradle" for Jesus' waiting years. Unlike Mary, he did not live to see the fruit of his obedience.

In many ways, the shepherds were the first church: receiving the message, believing, and going out to tell. I wonder what it was like on the hillside that night. Were they all of one mind? Was there controversy over how they should proceed? Were some so caught up in the busyness of shepherding that they never saw the angels? Did their experience fade over time, or did they become followers?

The Magi, looking beyond the ordinary of everyday life, saw a wondrous light. Unlike the immediacy of the shepherds' experience, they faithfully followed the star, perhaps by times wearily, until they found Jesus. They arrived with treasured gifts, and they

left quietly. Their presence brought the wider world, all of us, to the Incarnation.

Is it not deeply moving that it was those people, in those circumstances that God chose to reveal the inbreaking of the divine into humanity? Is it not equally moving that we, in our day, have been chosen by God to receive, live and share the Good News of the Incarnation? In many ways, our experience of the Incarnation reflects theirs.

It is true for us that we live with both understanding and doubts; that the journey can be difficult; that we may not see the fruit of our labour. It is equally true that our lives, both humble and mighty, when lived out in faithfulness and obedience to God's will are part of God's plan to redeem the world.

It is true for us that angels sing to our hearts, and when we lift our eyes above the busyness and demands of life, we can become the crucible for receiving and sharing the Gospel. We decide whether the song fades from our hearts in January, or whether we live as disciples.

It is true for us that God provides light for the journey to new places, new understandings. Like the Magi, we are called to a personal reverence, and an offering of the best that we have to share (not just what we can spare) poured out like pure nard, in extravagant love at Jesus' feet.

Jesus promised that He is "the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life", and that we "are the light of the world."

May God be with us and live through us in profound new ways this Christmastide.

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# Into The Twenty-first Century

RODGER FORSMAN

By the time the next issue of *The Bulletin* reaches you the ABF will have a fully operational web site. The decision to engage in this new venture is based on two convictions: first, that the ABF's stated aims are still worth pursuing; and second, that contemporary electronic media offer an unprecedented opportunity in communications.

The aims of the ABF are stated on the back page of this issue. In one way or another they all involve the idea of people interacting with one another for a variety of purposes: this is what we label "communication." Sometimes we interact in order to convey information, to persuade, to query assumptions and reasoning, to help ourselves and others to think through an issue, and to reach decisions. This kind of interaction, broadly described, is what we call "education." On the other hand, we sometimes interact in order to establish or develop friendships, to learn about each other, to entertain and be entertained: in short, to foster good relationships with each other. This kind of interaction is usually known, in religious circles, as "fellowship." Of course these are not polar opposites, and there are subtle interweavings that depend on the purposes of our multi-faceted interactions with other people.

Heretofore the ABF has pursued its aims almost exclusively by means of its semiannual assemblies and through its printed publications, particularly *The Bulletin*. Keeping in mind that these are essentially tools of communication we can immediately identify some of their strengths and limitations. Assemblies, for example, feature face-to-face oral presentation of information, the give-and-take of discussion and deliberation, the possibility of people learning something or even changing their minds on issues, and the building of consensus. An obvious limitation is the fact that communication is restricted to those who attend and take part in some way.

Our publications can also provide a lot of information and stimulate reflection. By its nature print provides relatively permanent records. This is why it is usually superior to oral presentation for dealing with complex issues. Paper-based and physically circulated media also have important limitations. Most significant is the difficulty of generating and maintaining a readership within the financial resources of the ABF with a publication that demonstrably pursues the organization's aims.

More could be said on these topics, but there is enough here to enable us to see why a move towards computer-based communication is very attractive. First, it offers ease of access. We create and manage the web site, post a variety and quantity of information that *The Bulletin* or other print medium simply could not accommodate, and monitor public response to help us evaluate the effectiveness of our content. Second, we make it possible to reach audiences to which we currently have little access, as we will not be limited to the number of people who attend assemblies or who get *The Bulletin*. Third, we can foster interaction among our readers. An article printed in a magazine might stimulate someone's thoughts, but the difficulty of exploring the issue with the author or other readers is usually so great as to inhibit efforts to do so. By contrast, the same article posted on the Internet is already accompanied with the tools for making a response, and perhaps creating ongoing discussions among other interested parties. Other advantages of Internet-based communication could be cited.

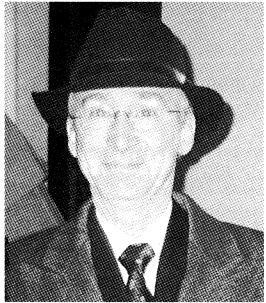
I do not anticipate the imminent demise of *The Bulletin*. Many of our readers will simply prefer to receive it in the mail or in their churches. Some do not have Internet access, or have no interest in acquiring it. As one reader has said to me: "What's wrong with the quill, anyway?" But we cannot ignore the whole generation which has grown up with keyboards and monitors and for whom words like 'blog', 'gigabit', 'Google', 'e-Bay', 'login', 'CPU' and 'download' are as much current English vocabulary as 'paper', and 'pen'—or 'quill'.

We'll keep you "posted"!

# Baptist/Roman Catholic

## Discussions:

DR. BARRY MORRISON



*Editor's note: Dr. Morrison received the Th.D. degree from Regis College (Toronto School of Theology, University of Toronto). His dissertation is entitled: "The Theology and Spirituality of the Lord's Supper in the Worship of the Baptist Tradition". Since 2004 he has been Senior Minister of Wolfville Baptist Church. He is a member of the Worship and Spirituality Committee of the Baptist World Alliance. In December 2004, Dr.*

*Morrison participated in theological discussions between the Baptist World Alliance and the Vatican Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.*

One of the stated purposes of the Baptist World Alliance is "to promote understanding and cooperation among Baptist bodies and with other Christian groups, in keeping with the unity of Christ." In keeping with this mandate, on December 10–11, 2004, eleven Baptist theologians from various North American constituencies of the Baptist World Alliance met with nine Roman Catholic theologians in Washington, D.C. The meetings were co-chaired by Dr. Denton Lotz, General Secretary of the Baptist World Alliance, and Bishop Brian Farrell, Secretary of the Vatican Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. Also attending from Rome was The Rev. Msgr. John Radano.

This was the third such regional gathering, the first having been held with Latin American Baptists in Buenos Aires, Argentina in 2001; and the second, with European Baptists, at the Vatican in December, 2003. These regional conversations represent significant steps in addressing important issues, but do not carry the same force as official international dialogue. If and when international

conversations are undertaken, they will have a strong foundation on which to build.

Each day began with prayer, followed by the presentation and discussion of papers on assigned topics. On Friday, we met at the headquarters of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, where it was my privilege to begin with the presentation of a paper on "Baptism: Entrance to the Church." A Roman Catholic theologian, Dr. Susan Wood, also presented a paper on "Baptism and the Church."

The discussion that followed served to highlight areas of similarity as well as differences in theology and practice. Of note is the Roman Catholic desire to see baptism as involving a sequence of rites of initiation, which may begin in infancy with enrolment in the infant catechumenate, to be followed by water baptism at some later time. This should not be understood as delaying baptism, but as construing immersion as one part of a much broader sacrament of Christian initiation. Baptists may well be pleased with this thinking. At the same time, Baptists may have something to learn from the Roman Catholic emphasis on the corporate and ecclesial nature of baptism, and the careful theology that has been developed around these themes.

The focus of Saturday's discussions at the headquarters of the Baptist World Alliance was the role of Mary in the Church. Sister Sara Butler presented two papers: "Mary, Christ and the Church" and "The Dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and The Assumption." Dr. Timothy George presented a chapter he had written on "The Blessed Virgin Mary in Evangelical Perspective" (from Carl Braaten, ed. *Mary, Mother of God*). Dr. George suggested that much of Baptist suspicion of the veneration of the mother of Jesus is rooted in the anti-Catholic polemic of our early years. While noting that there are elements of Roman Catholic Marian dogma that Baptists could not embrace, (including the doctrines of the immaculate conception, the assumption, and Mary's perpetual virginity) he proposed that honouring Mary may not be without biblical warrant. Depicting Mary as representative of the church "in its primary vocation and call to discipleship," Dr. George suggests, presents "a Mary whom evangelicals can and should embrace."

The discussions of baptism and Mary yielded some surprises.

Both Baptists and Roman Catholics were able to name, and to a certain degree dispel, unhelpful stereotypes and preconceptions. Areas of disagreement were noted with no attempt to understate their importance or difficulty. Our primary goal was to listen carefully to our partners in conversation and, likewise, to share openly and honestly with one another. More formal theological discussion was complemented by informal conversation at breaks and meals. In the brief two days we experienced the beginnings of significant ecumenical friendships.

Reflecting on this sort of ecumenical encounter, it is clear that dialogue can happen on several levels:

1. *theology and dogma*: how we think and speak about what we believe;
2. *hermeneutics and authority*: how our interpretations of the Bible and Christian tradition have influenced our history and organization;
3. *ecclesiology*: how we understand the nature of the Church and the local Christian community;
4. *liturgy and practice*: how our beliefs shape, and may be shaped by, our worship and mission; and
5. *spirituality*: how we experience divine grace in our various traditions.

All are important as we seek to know and understand one another and further our unity in Christ.

It is also important that we find common languages by which to engage in ecumenical dialogue. For example, lacking a *magisterium* such as informs Roman Catholic faith and practice, Baptists may appear theologically inconsistent or undecided. In our mistrust of creeds we may find ourselves at a disadvantage when clarity of belief or practice would enable more focused dialogue. Historically, Baptists have given expression to our faith in various confessions and covenants. Our conversations with other Christian groups may well benefit from recovery of a "lost language of faith" as expressed in these historic documents.

At the same time, the need to interpret the central values of our denomination to others reveals the diversity of Baptist theology and

practice. We discover that it is not possible to speak on behalf of all; rather, our expressions of faith are in process. This in itself may be a sign of hope for ecumenical relations as we open ourselves to share with others and also to receive the particular gifts and insights they bring to the table. As Father Thomas Ryan reminds us in *A Survival Guide for Ecumenically Minded Christians*:

too much energy has gone into defending differences and maintaining self-definitions that allow us to keep our distance from each other.... It makes us competitive people, who want to maintain our identities at all costs. But it is not a question of some belonging to Apollo, some to Peter, and some to Paul. The Gospel asserts that our real identity is not at the edges of our existence where we can brag about our specialties, but at the centre where we are rooted in Christ and where the bond of the Spirit gives us our essential Christian sameness.

It is worth noting that the late Pope John Paul II considered the work of Christian unity a priority of the highest order. His thoughts on the matter may serve to stimulate us to continue both the inner and outward disciplines of ecumenism:

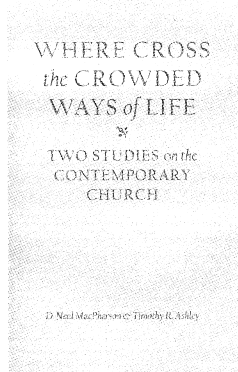
We will be able to do only very little in the work for the whole Church ... if we have not reached this close intimacy with the Lord Jesus ... if we do not keep his word in us, trying to discover its hidden riches every day.... The external unity for which we pray will be the germinating, the flourishing of this close union with Christ which all the faithful alike ... must have.... There cannot be unity among brothers and sisters if there is not deep union—of life, thought, soul, resolutions, imitation—with Christ Jesus.

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## Book Notice

MACPHERSON, D. NEAL, & TIMOTHY R. ASHLEY.

*Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life: Two Studies on the Contemporary Church.* Wolfville: Atlantic Baptist Fellowship, September 2005.



Published by the Atlantic Baptist Fellowship and attractively produced by Gaspereau Press, this book has enjoyed a very favourable reception. It was intended to assist our readers to keep abreast of current scholarship which bears specifically on thought about the Church today. *Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life: Two Studies on the Contemporary Church* consists of two sets of lectures delivered by the authors to two ABF Assemblies, one in October 2004, the other in May 2005. The lectures vigorously challenge the currently popular assumption

that the purpose of the Church is to attain secular influence and power. Both look askance at the Church's historical tendency to accommodate itself to the existing power structures which result in human suffering. Both argue—one on historical-theological grounds and the other on biblical-theological grounds—that the Church's proper mission is Incarnational: to bring to the world God's redeeming love and grace by exemplifying this love, this grace in practice.

There are still a few copies available from the Editor ([forsman@ns.sympatico.ca](mailto:forsman@ns.sympatico.ca)). While there is no charge for the book, we do remind our readers that the ABF is not a wealthy organization, and we do need help to recover part of the costs of printing and distribution, which amounts to around \$15 per book.

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## Thinking about Stewardship

At this time of year churches often find themselves preparing budgets and wondering—or perhaps worrying—about cash flow. Such concerns often eventuate in thinking about stewardship. But what is “stewardship”, properly conceived?

The word ‘steward’ is derived from the Old English word *stiweard*, literally sty-ward (sty-keeper), and by extension, the keeper of a manor hall. The word thus denotes a person by reference to a task: managing what belongs to someone else. Stewardship is the responsibility of looking after someone else's business or property. Thus Christian stewardship is *care for, or care of, the work of God*. To exercise our responsibility of stewardship, then, we have to know what the work of God is.

So what is God doing in the world? There are two basic responses to this question. One, expressed terms of the main narrative themes of the Christian story, is that God is active in the world for our salvation. To a very great extent Christian theology is essentially the attempt to express this conviction in terms of a consistent pattern of images and analogies. The second answer is given in terms of the effects of God's action: lives changed, hope restored, faith renewed, the coming of a kingdom of right relationships in which we can be the people we were created to be. This is what stewardship is about.

This way of thinking helps us get away from the notion that stewardship is essentially a matter of fund-raising. Stewardship *does* involve generating financial support for the church, of course. But consider the fact that churches usually undertake financial campaigns in the face of some emergency: the roof leaks, the heating system needs replacing, the walls crack, and so on. This crisis-response conception of stewardship is in practice addressed primarily to building and property maintenance, with little or no thought given to what is involved in caring for God's work in the world. This inadequate conception of stewardship needs to be replaced by one which puts long-range education in what is involved in caring for/of the work of God at the centre of church planning. The following three principles point us towards a proper understanding of stewardship.

I. *Stewardship is essentially a long-term educational activity in what it is to be the church.* Stewardship is basically a matter of ongoing education, not short-term fund-raising. The usual “stewardship campaign” has a place, of course, but even this has to be carefully prepared. The best preparation is a lifetime of learning about the relation between our resources and what is involved in caring for the work of God.

II. *Resources are allocated in ways which are demonstrably effective in fulfilling our mission.* This has to do with cash flow planning on the expense side. One of the easiest things to do in planning is to dream up goals. The hardest thing to do—which is why it is usually ignored—is to determine whether our activities are likely to attain these goals. Yet this is the crucial step, for it helps us keep our sights on what makes us a church in the first place, and it enables us to measure the effectiveness of our activities. If we do not understand *how* our activities are going to enable us to achieve our goals, we cannot determine whether or not we are getting any place.

III. *Respect those who are being asked to support the enterprise.* This has to do with the income side. People become *willing* participants in an enterprise only if they are *treated* as participants. This means that they must have *effective* involvement in decision-making. People are not going to support a project enthusiastically and generously if it is not working towards goals which they can accept as their own. It matters not a whit how much we harangue them about “commitment”, “duty”, “biblical principles of giving”—the usual stewardship rhetoric—if they find by experience that there is no effective avenue for sharing in decision-making. Training in stewardship, therefore, has to be addressed as an aspect of personal growth. Mature stewardship is accomplished by enabling people to discover by experience that *the church is the means of God’s grace to others and thereby to themselves.*

Perhaps it would be better to take this point out of theological language altogether and say the following: stewardship education is a matter of offering people opportunity and explicit encouragement to employ their gifts, their skills and knowledge for the enhancement of the lives of others. This enables both giver and receiver to grow in a mutually enriching context. A church which fails to enable all members to and grow and mature in these ways will have a hard time with stewardship, because it will in effect

be saying to people, “We want your money, but are not really interested in your ideas and abilities.” People pick up messages of this kind very quickly. The consequence is not only that their financial support is minimized, but so are other non-monetary contributions they might make. Furthermore, for them the church is largely dysfunctional.

The basic question for stewardship planning, therefore, is *not* “How are we going to get people to buy into the programs and projects that our Boards and Committees have decided upon?” This smacks of a top-down planning mentality which is fundamentally at odds with respect for people. The correct question is: “How can we help all members of the congregation to develop their gifts, skills and knowledge for the enhancement of others?” This places the emphasis, not on getting people into line or on whipping up enthusiasm, but on the basic responsibility of the church, namely, caring for the work of God. God is undoubtedly doing many things in the world, things which we know nothing about. But we are sure of at least this much: God’s work includes making people the best that they can be, and our job as stewards is to let that saving work advance through us.

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