



BY SHIRLEY YODER BRUBAKER

A member of the diaspora

Returning to a church where we once belonged

▲ Stan Kropf (right) leads (from left) Judi Jones, Sharon Nisly, Melvena Hostetler, Judy Stutzman, Doris Schrock, Marlys Yoder and Shirley Yoder Brubaker in singing "Shall We Gather at the River" at the Sheridan Mennonite Church cemetery.

Photo by Marlene Kropf

I come from revival meetings and altar calls and kneeling for prayer. I come from summer Bible school and playing Dare Base, from memorizing a verse to recite every Sunday evening in children's meeting. I come from head coverings, *Life Songs* #2 and "As far as I know I have peace with God and man and it is my desire to commune." I come from homemade unleavened Communion bread and from those for whom keeping the faith was too demanding.

I belong to the diaspora of my home church.

In the 1960s, Sheridan (Ore.) Mennonite Church left the Pacific Coast Conference of the Mennonite Church. The decision was made to "hold the line" against what was deemed encroaching liberalism. When I finished college and asked for my letter of membership to be transferred to another Mennonite congregation nearer my place of employment, I was informed that no letter would be sent. I was no longer a member. I thought my cut hair was the issue, but no, it

was my support of ecumenical relationships. The bishop was kind with his pronouncement, but I left his home wondering if I had heard correctly. I had.

So like the diaspora in the Bible, many of us former members and attenders of that congregation sit down by the water and hang our harps on the willows. We weep as we remember what once was: a congregation of over 300 members, one that birthed six smaller congregations and several more mission outreaches, one that loved to sing and at Sunday noon eat at each other's tables.

We gave public testimony to the nurture this congregation had provided.

But we missed each other. About a dozen years ago, we had a weekend reunion at the church. We gathered for food and storytelling, singing and laughing. The current congregation placed some restrictions on our gathering, but they were happy to have us use the building. We gave public testimony to the nurture this congregation had provided. We even went searching for the missing plaque that had hung above the pulpit: "Salvation is not reformation nor imitation nor education nor conformation nor imagination but is regeneration. That is a new creation found in God's revelation and is for every nation."

Several years passed, and the urge to be together again was strong. So a group of women gathered for lunch at a restaurant

in a nearby town. Again there was joy in seeing each other and more storytelling. We laughed over how we had changed with the passing of time. Lunch wasn't long enough, so we drove across town to a former member's house for afternoon tea.

This month the diaspora is getting together for a third time. This time we'll begin at the town's history museum, then we'll eat lunch and tell stories, and later we will drive the six miles to the church's cemetery. We'll wander among the tombstones and markers and remember that cloud of witnesses who have gone before.

We'll remember Oliver, a logger whose back was broken by a falling tree, who often wheeled himself to the front of the church to give testimony to God's goodness in his life. We'll remember Elsie, who captured our interest as children with her extended flannelgraph story of *Pilgrim's Progress*. We traveled with Christian as he climbed the Hill of Difficulty and survived Doubting Castle on his way to the Celestial City. We'll find the tombstone for Elmer, a conscientious objector who barely escaped death from hanging during World War I at Camp Fremont in California. And I will pause at my mom and dad's graves, my "in the flesh" cloud of witnesses.

Frederick Buechner writes in *The Sacred Journey*: "How they do live on, those giants of our childhood....The people we loved. The people who loved us. The people who, for good or ill, taught us things."

Once or twice when I have been home to visit family, I have attended a funeral—a friend's

parent or a Sunday school teacher. What a serendipitous moment to feel like I still belong there! My tears for the departed are not just for the one being laid to rest. They are also for another larger, more intangible loss, one that refuses to be laid to rest.

It was not a perfect congregation. There are painful memories. In the 1950s, one mother with three young children lost her membership when her husband left and there was a divorce. Just when she most needed the support of her congregation, it was denied. Her daughter finds our reunions difficult because of how their mother was treated. Too many of these stories exist. How can we heal those wounds if we don't keep meeting?

How can we heal those wounds if we don't keep meeting?

What keeps drawing us back together? I'm not the only one in the diaspora who wonders. We differ on theological positions and faith practices from the home church and even from each other. But we have come to recognize our complex feelings about this church where we once belonged and in some way still belongs to us.

So we keep coming back.



Shirley Yoder Brubaker
attends Park View
Mennonite Church in
Harrisonburg, Va.