

A letter to readers of *Vision*

Arlo Frech

Dear People of Vision,

Last Tuesday, I drove into town to get a jar of pigs' feet and some coconut oil. We raise pigs here on the farm, of course, and after raising a piglet right on up to a hog, we like to enjoy as much of it as we can for as long as we can. But my good wife, Emma, draws the line at pigs' feet. She refuses to pickle them and won't even think about eating them. So I was in town, in Stemming, to buy some pickled pigs' feet and some coconut oil. Emma likes to put a little of that on her oatmeal in the morning, and I cannot figure out why. Anyway, when I got into Stemming, I saw my sister Dora. Dora is the pastor of our church—Christ Church, Stemming. I greeted her, of course. She said she couldn't stay and

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talk, because she had a meeting. Dora is the first pastor we've had who went to seminary, and it seems like a whole lot of what she does is go to meetings. Before she hurried off, Dora said that the Mennonites were doing an issue of *Vision* about joy.

We at Christ Church, here, have some familiarity with Mennonites. And with joy. It was my grandpa—Dora's, too—Marcellus Frech, who came up here from Tennessee and started the church. Grandpa Marcellus was Pentecostal Holiness, and in the 1940s, that was not a religion well represented in upper

North Dakota and lower Manitoba; Stemming straddles the border between them. Grandpa did not feel at home in the churches around Stemming, though he was friendly with the mostly German people. Besides farming, Grandpa Marcellus ran a barbershop in Stemming, open on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons and Saturday mornings, so he got to know a good many of

the Stemming menfolk, and not a few of the women, who liked the way Grandpa Marcellus gave a shampoo and set a permanent. I imagine the men and women both enjoyed the way he talked, which was like warm molasses pouring over a ripe peach. And he listened to them. “Those folk were lacking in the joy of the Lord,” he used to say. And one Sunday evening, in the city park, Grandpa Marcellus started the Joy of the Lord Pentecostal Church of Stemming.

When my father—Dora’s, too—Bartimaeus Frech, took over from Grandpa Marcellus, he thought to bring about a bit more sobriety to our church. I believe this had something to do with our father’s marrying our mother, a Manitoba Mennonite woman, Elvina Reimer, who had an import/export arrangement with Papa Bartimaeus. They would meet at the US/Canada border, between our house and the barn, where Papa handed Elvina a can of Guernsey cream, and she passed to him a bushel of corn and one of potatoes. In this handing and passing, their hands sometimes touched, and it seems they tasted joy. Anyway, Dora and I are here. And the Joy of the Lord Pentecostal Church became the First Old Mennonite General Conference Church of Stemming. That’s where I learned the joy of the Lord. It was a different sort of joy, I guess, from what those folk in the Pentecostal church shouted out. But we sang some hymns in the FOMGC Church that made my soul soar, and Papa could preach the devil right out of a sinner. I know that was joy.

Then Dora, my sister, went off to seminary in Boissevain—at St. Julian’s College of Holy Doctrine and Gregorian Chant. She has done a dump-truck load of good for our church, which she renamed Christ Church, Stemming. Some of the old folks, who still remember Grandpa Marcellus and Papa Bartimaeus, and my mother Elvina, find it hard to accept all this change. Gunda Thiessen complained that we’re not biblical anymore, like we were when we were Mennonites. “Shoot,” she said, “we may as well be Lutherans!” Dora told her that the Bible gets read in our church, and in Lutheran ones, more than it does in the Manitoba/North Dakota Mennonite archipelago. I don’t know what *archipelago* means, and neither does Emma, but Gunda quieted right down. We’re still hoping for the joy of the Lord at Christ Church.

I talked about all this with our closest neighbor, Gus Dobrinski. Gus raises Angus cattle and is given to drink, but he sometimes sheds light on things. I asked him about joy. He said,

I asked Gus about joy. He said, "You can't make up joy, no matter how loud you clap or play the guitar. The good Lord makes it and gives it, and even if I don't feel it, I share it."

"Well, I don't really feel joy going to church or coming away from it. But I'm Catholic, and I know it's not about my own feelings. I know there's joy in the church, among all the folks, and in the bread and wine. You can't make up joy, no matter how loud you clap or play the guitar. The good Lord makes it and gives it, and even if I don't feel it, I share it."

Well, sometimes Gus isn't much help after all. But I've been enjoying the pickled pigs' feet and avoiding Emma's coconut oil. I pray that all of you will know the joy of the Lord, whether you feel it or not.

Your friend,
Arlo Frech

PS The Mrs. says "hello."