

Editorial

Gayle Gerber Koontz

A Ken Medema song asks, “If this is not a place where tears are understood, then where can I go to cry?” Are our churches places where tears are understood? Do we open ourselves to the presence of God so deeply, so widely, so wisely, that suffering unbound and shared becomes clay in the hands of our divine potter? The writers for this issue have known tears, and they consider that clay of suffering—lumpy, shapeless, wasted, mysterious, moldable. They teach us, churches diverse in character and context, what it might

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mean to become more thoroughly the places on earth that Christ calls us to be—places where, when we must cry, tears are understood; places where, with time and burdens borne no longer alone, mourning turns, sometimes at least, to laughter.

Congregations emerge as places of sustenance and hope in some of the essays you will find in this issue. Esther Epp-Tiessen considers the intersecting relationships of family, congregation, faith, and feeling in her account of the experience of losing a young son to a devastating illness. Carolyn Schrock-

Shenk, facing profound physical suffering and the identity crisis it provokes, describes the slow process—in the arms of her congregation—of making peace with a God who hasn’t ended her suffering. Willy Mushagalusa, once a refugee in the Congo, testifies to the critical role of worship with fellow believers in making traumatic suffering endurable. And Mary Thiessen Nation shares stories of faithful urban women of color, whose suffering—“maldistributed, enormous, and trans-generational”—has not snuffed out their ability to walk with hope and trust alongside others who suffer.

But in a pointed and wrenching way, suffering challenges trust in the goodness and power of God. Peter Dula, drawing from Christian tradition and personal experience in Rwanda and Iraq, reflects on the stubborn theological puzzle of the relation of God and suffering. Gordon Matties explores the biblical basis for speaking of God as a suffering God. And Nekeisha Alexis-Baker listens and responds to African American liberation theologians who rethink the meaning of the redemptive cross of Christ, given the past suffering of slaves and the present suffering of many who face racial and gender injustice.

Harry Loewen and James Juhnke take up another difficult issue for the church. How should we think about and practice forgiveness when believers' suffering is inflicted by other people? What does suffering do to the spirit? How should wrongs—whether directed at one's family or at martyrs of one's faith community—be remembered, righted, forgiven, as Jesus taught us to do?

The church also causes suffering, overlooks it, and turns from it. From her perspective as conference minister, Dorothy Nickel Friesen recounts ways the church hurts pastors and members, and considers ways these hurts might be prevented and redeemed. Brice Balmer explains why men's pain is often invisible and suggests how the church might better walk with men who are suffering. And to those who are discouraged because their illnesses have not been miraculously cured—and to church members who suggest that healing will occur if only enough faith is present—Samuel Lopez asserts the power of living hope as described in 1 Peter as key to believers' ability to face difficult times and death.

Pastors have a special challenge in remaining focused on that living hope while carrying close to their hearts the chronic suffering of others. How can such pastors hold up under the weight? Duane Beck's essay speaks especially to those who offer pastoral care day after day after day. He suggests the "Beatitude path" to guide pastoral care of others and care of self in the process of responding to chronic suffering.

The church in its sermons, such as the one offered by Leonard Beechy, and in its songs, such as the new texts written by Adam Tice, continues to address the reality and power of suffering in our lives and to claim faith in the greater power of God's enduring,

undying love. I hope you will find, as I did, that the pieces included in this issue both name the reality of suffering and affirm its subordination to the light of the risen Christ.

About the editor

Gayle Gerber Koontz is professor of theology and ethics at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana.