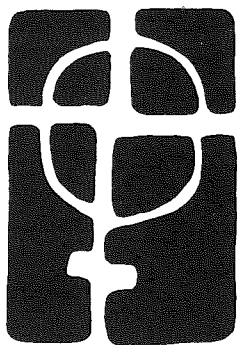


Women's Theological Center



Quarterly Newsletter

JUNE, 1993
Volume 11, No. 2

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I Come of My People

by Nancy Richardson

*I come of my people
for my people I come
My people are the women
this earth rising
Sister come and take my hand
we'll circle every land
You're my people and I want
my people free.*

Music and lyrics by
Carolyn McDade, 1984

Carolyn McDade's song both names a vision of feminism and raises questions feminists must face. *I come of my people*: Who are our people? What are our roots? How do those roots shape our lives and connect or cut us off from other women? *For my people I come*: To whom and for what are we accountable? With whom do we stand in solidarity? On what basis do we claim women of this earth as our people? What does the notion of women taking hands around the globe require of us?

When I began to think about how to



write a "farewell address" to be published in this final newsletter during my tenure as Co-Director of the WTC, this song came to my mind for two reasons. One is that it points to questions that I think have been central to the WTC for these eleven years. The other is that it reminds me of the importance of the connections we have had in that time with so many women and women's organizations, Carolyn McDade and the Women's Center in Plainville among them. It would be impossible for me to name and thank all these women or to express my profound appreciation and respect for the work they do. Without their work, ours would be both impossible and futile. I do want, though, to try to reflect on what the questions have meant.

When we began our work, we were African American and white Christian women, all connected in some way to theological education. We wanted to create an alternative to what we had experienced as students and faculty in traditional institutions. We wanted to know how a theology grounded in a quest for justice for women would look. What would we need to study? How would we study? How would our study connect with action? In trying to address the questions, we held endless meetings, called consultations of women activists in the area to help give shape to the curriculum, formed alliances with women's organizations, and affiliations with Emmanuel College and the Episcopal Divinity School.

We had barely begun this process when we realized that an alternative to theological education that was truly "an alternative" could not be based solely in the academy, but had to explore questions of faith and social justice in a much broader perspective, in places where women live and work on a day-to-day basis. As a result, our first effort at theological education, in April of 1982, was the symposium "Wellsprings of Power: Women and Faith." During the next year, after Cheryl Giles and I were hired as part-time Co-Directors, that theme was expanded into a year-long series of community-based lectures and workshops. The opening event of the series, "Faith that Confronts", laid the groundwork for programs on domestic violence,

Memorial/Recognition Fund
Contribution

from **Nelle G. Slater**
in recognition and appreciation of
Nancy Richardson

from **Dominican Sisters of St.
Catherine of Siena** in recognition of
Dominican Leadership

and from a friend in honor of
Kristin and Karen Hokanson, in
celebration of their silver jubilee with
the Sisters of Notre Dame.

homelessness, sexuality, and images of God. The vision of women's collective power, rooted in faith and seeking justice, that gave shape to that program is still at the core of our work, though the intervening years have led us into new and deeper understandings of their meanings.

Adrienne Rich reminds us that "the maps they gave us are out-dated by years."¹

When we began, we knew two things: women's concerns were being ignored or trivialized in most schools of theology across the country, and any effort that seeks justice for women must, at the same time, seek racial and economic justice. We didn't know a lot of other things: how to start an organization, how to raise money, how to create a genuine alternative, how to insure authentic bonds between community-based knowing and academy-based knowing. As far as we could tell, there were no reliable maps for us to follow.

But there were a lot of resources--resources of women committed to change, and some men prepared to use their power in the service of women's agendas. It would be impossible to mention all the women involved during the years, but those there at the beginning made an important mark on the direction we would take. Called together by Francine Cardman, Sue Costa, Cheryl Giles, Dolores Harrall, Elaine Huber, Nancy Hughes, Claire McGowan, and I agreed to embark on this journey together. As we moved from what was called "a modest proposal"² for a one year program in theological

education for women to what was to be named the Women's Theological Center, the work of two men was also critical: Harvey Guthrie, Dean, and Ed Stiess, Director of Degree Programs at the Episcopal Divinity School, worked with us to develop an affiliation agreement between EDS and WTC. Through the efforts of Helen Wright, Marie Augusta Neal and Marion Kilson at Emmanuel College, a similar agreement was developed between the WTC and Emmanuel. We were on our way to becoming an organization, shaped by a definition of feminism articulated by the women who drafted the original "modest proposal" from which we worked: "a commitment to the liberation of women beginning with the poorest, most oppressed and most exploited."³

The history of the WTC is too complex to rehearse here, and requires more voices than mine for the recording. All I can do is reflect in some way how working on the planning for the organization for two years and as a staff member for eleven years has affected my life, my vision for theological education, and my understanding at this point of what it might mean for women to join hands and power to make our people free.

As I think about this, lots of words come to mind--words like *community* and *conflict*, *spirituality* and *politics*, *faith* and *justice*, *laughter* and *tears*, *hope* and *frustration*, *energy* and *exhaustion*. Words that pull up images from my memory:



board meetings, for example.

The first board meeting was in December of 1981. It was called by the group of eight mentioned above, which had by that time expanded to about twelve and was calling itself a "Coordinating Committee". We invited women who were leaders in theological education, church, and community settings to serve as a Board of Directors for the emerging Women's Theological Center. We proposed a set of by-laws that we thought "proper" for a "Board". The Board would make all policy decisions in bi-annual meetings and the Coordinating Committee, meeting monthly, would carry them out, there being no staff at that point. The "Board" said "No, the folks who do the work must make the decisions." The result was a Board of Directors that consisted of two standing Committees: a local decision-making body called the Coordinating Committee and a more broadly-based Advisory Committee charged with attending to long-range planning and development of the organization. So we began learning what we needed to know: in this case, how to build shared power into organizational structures while insuring financial and legal accountability. This became the basis of the Articles of Incorporation filed in January, 1982.

There are other Board meetings that come to mind, many involving struggle and panic about money. One, in particular, in which it seemed that



everyone left angry and frustrated and I, then a staff member, wondered if we would ever get the group together again in the same room. This worry, while possibly shared by others at the time, proved to be unnecessary. We did gather, having learned from the mistakes and challenges of the previous meeting, with renewed energy and commitment to keep going. In the process, we learned yet another lesson that has sustained us through many rough spots: **genuine community requires struggle; conflict is inevitable. Working across difference and living on the margins requires openness to challenge, learning from mistakes, hanging in, not hiding from anger.**

Two Board meetings in 1984 became defining events that both shaped program for the 1984-85 year and set a vision for future work. In January 1984, a sub-committee of African American women proposed offering a program that would provide educational opportunities attractive to women of color, and not available elsewhere. That proposal led to the shaping of a major Resource Center program series called "Naming/Claiming/Changing: Sojourns with Black Women" for December of that same year. In another meeting in December of that year, board member Joan Martin asked what the WTC would look like if it had been planned by and for African American women. Her question led to an internal anti-racism process within the Board, and to defining a focus for Resource Center work which eventually led to the "Loves Herself. Regardless" program for African American women.

The "Sojourns with Black Women"

series, under the leadership of then Co-Director Adele Smith-Penniman, included such speakers as Audre Lorde, Bernice Johnson Reagon, Barbara Smith, Karen Fields, Katie Cannon and Joan Martin. The internal anti-racism work set a precedent whereby participation in anti-racism training was required of all white members of the Board, and meeting in separate groups of white women and women of color became a regular feature of Board meetings. This model, recognizing our different, though related, priorities and tasks in an anti-racist agenda, is also central to the anti-racism training that the WTC does with other groups. The work of the Resource Center, from the beginning multi-cultural and anti-racist, took on new direction as a result of Joan Martin's question. Under the leadership of Donna Bivens, hired as Co-Director in 1985, "Loves Herself" continues to grow and impact the direction and priorities of the Center as we enter the second decade. Again we were learning, in deeper and clearer ways that **the questions we ask shape the answers we get. How we name ourselves determines the priorities we set.**

By May 1987, it had become clear that the somewhat *ad hoc* style that had characterized the Board's work was inadequate to the scope of the program we had developed. Under a new Board structure, Joan Martin and Letty Russell became Co-Chairs, and provided firm, supportive, challenging, and loving leadership as we entered upon a rethinking of our direction. What was our vision? To whom were we accountable? How could our structure support our work? Our current mission

statement, adopted in 1987, born of both shared commitment and deep differences, represented a new naming of ourselves as we were moving from nascent hopes to institutional reality.

The Women's Theological Center is women gathering from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, engaging in action-based educational and community programs. The Center seeks to create a feminist/womanist ethic and energy for transforming oppressive religious and social structures. Through confronting injustices of race, class, gender and sexual orientation, participants are challenged to deal with the oppressions in their lives and to stand in solidarity with all oppressed peoples. The Center is rooted in women's critique of Christian traditions. It provides a participatory model for women of varying religious perspectives to address theological and spiritual issues as they define them for their own communities.

We were learning in a profound way that moving from shared vision to sustained action requires persistence and love in the midst of pain and struggle.

It is impossible to think about my learning in the last eleven years without noting how much I have learned from Donna Bivens. I could not begin to express all that I've learned and the many ways I have grown through the



opportunity I have had of working with her. I think the most surprising thing I learned is not to avoid the word *spirituality*. For years before Donna joined the WTC staff, I had resisted using the word, associating it with other-worldly a-political piety (this, despite the fact that the WTC Study/Action program offered a course called "Liberation Spirituality" that was anything but other-worldly and a-political!). From Donna, I have learned that knowing one's roots and the

WTC invites you to a
farewell celebration
and benefit in honor of

Nancy Richardson

on the evening of
June 19, 1993
at the Children's Museum
in Boston.

Poetry, Stories, Music, Dancing!
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pay what you can

grounding for one's values is the spiritual base that is essential to sustain political work. I have learned that the crisis we face in this country is fundamentally a spiritual crisis, marked by a loss of sense of community, common purpose and accountability to one another. The vision of "transforming oppressive religious and social structures" proclaimed in the WTC mission statement requires a view of spirituality that is essentially communal, rooted in an understanding of humanity that is fundamentally social. It requires a recognition that when we deny who we are, when we separate ourselves from our history and our people, when we claim an identity that is not our own, we cut ourselves off from our source of power, both spiritual and political.

Working at the Women's Theological Center in general and the Study/Action program in particular, has been the most rewarding, though often frustrating, experience of my life. When we began ten years ago with the idea of an alternative program in theological education for women, some folks told us

it couldn't be done. But we did it anyway! We have built a model of theological education that takes seriously the particular communities from which women come.

A program in theological education that begins with the questions and issues of the participants (as opposed to the accumulated wisdom of the theological disciplines) offers the possibility of new insights into fundamental questions of human nature, notions of the holy, and moral agency. I have learned how to learn from other women--women who have had the courage to challenge others and listen to the voices of women very different from themselves. I have learned how the experience of violence affects one's response to conflict. I have learned what it means to hide behind privilege and what it takes to resist that temptation. I have seen the courage of women who faced the unacknowledged power and privilege of others, and of those who refused to flee another's anger. I have learned more about teaching and learning than I could have imagined possible when I began this work.

At the same time, I have learned that no change is painless, that a search for safety inevitably ends either in disappointment or in redefining the meaning of safety. Safety understood as "warm feelings" or absence of conflict is not possible if the task is authentic meeting across difference. I have also learned that listening, mutual respect, openness to challenge requires a measure of self-confidence and self-respect that are not "givens" for any of us, but must be nurtured again and again through challenge and struggle.

And I have learned a lot about limitations. My predisposition to keep trying until I "get it right" has been severely tested in Study/Action! Beginning with the questions and concerns of participants limits one's ability to predict from one year to the next what "getting it right" might mean. While this fact strains the patience of perfection-seekers like me, it serves as a good reminder that attending to the multiple effects of systemic injustice on the lives of women requires listening, really listening, again and again to the voices and silences in the sure knowledge

that the process of liberation is on-going for all of us. It is a reminder that however much I might long for the journey to *lead home*, Nelle Morton is, in fact, right: the journey is home.⁴

The experience of working in Study/Action has reinforced my conviction that theological education removed from justice-seeking action is doomed to perpetuate structures of power and privilege. Theological education committed to justice for women must hear and respond to the cries of women who are marginalized by systemic oppression, women

who are battered and sexually abused
who are imprisoned

who are homeless
who are struggling with and
recovering from drug and alcohol
abuse

who suffer from mental illness--or
have been labeled "crazy" because
of their resistance to systemic
oppression

who struggle daily against the
debilitating effects of poverty,
racism, sexism, and homophobia in
their personal and political lives

It is only when these voices are heard that theological education can be said to be using its resources in the service of justice rather than in the service of the powerful and privileged. Through the justice-seeking action that is at the core of the Study/Action program, we come face to face with both the power and the marginalization in our own lives and we learn to ask the questions that can help us find solutions for ourselves, standing in solidarity with others.

As I leave the WTC, I do so with both sadness and hope. I know I will never find another work setting that both challenges and supports as many parts of me as this one has. We have pushed and pulled, stretched and sighed, fought and celebrated, laughed and cried. I will miss all of this.

Yet, I am convinced that it is time for change, both for me and for the organization. For myself, I know that I will not really so much *leave* the WTC as change my way of relating to the organization and its vision. I expect to continue to be involved in it in a variety of ways, but without staff responsibilities,



from which I need a break. I also believe that organizations, like people, can get into habits of living that limit creativity. There comes a time when new voices and new visions are essential if an organization is to build on its strengths while remaining open and flexible enough for continued growth. I believe that time has come for the WTC. So while I leave with sadness, I also have immense confidence in the future of the organization and the possibilities before the WTC.

My commitment to the vision and work of the WTC remains strong. I hope to continue to be involved in that work through anti-racism training and continuing efforts to understand and live out the meaning of faith seeking justice/justice seeking faith.

My challenge to the WTC is that it keep its focus clear, always stretching beyond the simple and easy while recognizing that time and space and bodies are not without limits. Trying to do everything ultimately means doing nothing well. Our self-study is already showing us that we do some things very well, and that many would have us do much more. I am *not* convinced that more is better. I *am* convinced that trying to be a spiritual and political home for everyone means being little of substance to anyone. There are those who say of the WTC that we are a place where both the spiritual and the political are nourished. There are others who say that we are exclusive, arrogant, angry. I

hope that we fight against arrogance and that we seek to be inclusive of all who are willing to commit to seeking justice. We *are* angry about the structures of injustice that continue to ravage our lives and the lives of those we love. But we are also hopeful and energized by the power of our collective strength to withstand that assault. It is my hope that we can continually expand the circle of women who will join hands seeking solidarity, resisting the forces which would lead us to abandon one another.

The images of "sisterhood" and "solidarity", of women *joining hands*, *circling every land* are powerful feminist visions. Yet, in attempting to work across difference, we learn that solidarity requires, at the very least, a testing of assumptions, and a willingness to engage in conflict and struggle even among women, where many of us "dream of a common language."⁵ Beyond the testing and the conflict, solidarity requires acts of collaboration, of standing with women whose experience of oppression is different from ours, whose risks are more immediate at a particular time. It requires engagement in action for social transformation. It is in such concrete historical action that the possibility of solidarity can be tested.

This is our hope. This is our commitment. In living it out, against the odds, we learn again and again that "faith *does* give substance to our hopes, and makes us certain of realities we do not see."⁶ #

1. Adrienne Rich. "Poem XIII" in *The Dream of a Common Language*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978). Page 31.

2. "A Modest Proposal, March 1980", drafted by the Committee for Theological Education for Women for Ministry. The committee of eleven women, convened by Helen Wright, developed the proposal through a series of six consultations between December, 1977 and March, 1980.

3. From the minutes of the Third Consultation, held in Washington, DC, April 20-22, 1979.

4. Nelle Morton. *The Journey is Home*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985).

5. Adrienne Rich. "Origins and History of Consciousness" in *The Dream of a Common Language*. Page 7.

6. Hebrews 11:1

Thank You, Thank You!

by Loretta Williams

You've been great! Abundant thanks go to all who are helping us better understand whether WTC is doing what you, the board and staff want WTC to do. You've helped Julie Canniff and me learn a lot about WTC's impact--past, present and potential. Overall, you have said that WTC plays a unique role in women's lives and communities. There are commonalities in how you defined that role, and differences.

Who have we heard from? You range in age from 20 through 70. You are white, African American, Hispanic, Asian, Asian American women. You are Roman Catholic, post-Christian, unchurched, Pagan, Jewish, Episocpal, Friends, UUs, UCCs, many other Protestant, multi-faith, non-faith folk--a spectrum showing the myriad modes of women's spirituality. Many of you are working in human services and educational settings.

Those of you who read the newsletter only--who've not had the chance to attend any sessions here in Boston--reminded us all of the catalyzing, and sanity-sustaining role played by this newsletter.

Most importantly, the majority of you expressed high satisfaction with what WTC is all about. That is not to say that you saw no room for improvement. There were some recommendations about particular aspects needing reexamination. Some modifications were suggested. In the main, however, WTC has a strong positive reputation. Listen to some of what you said:

"WTC is a place for women who take their religious and political lives seriously."

"WTC is women reflecting on issues that effect everyone's life."

"WTC is successful because it's not just a place for white women, but a place of consistent ethnic diversity, and diversity of belief."

"WTC stretches me beyond what I thought possible--a consistent voice to enact one's beliefs."

"Consistently, the WTC is on the cutting edge of saying the hard things. Other places bear the fruit of this in

substantial ways."

"The WTC conference I went to made me realize just how much my Christian background still functions as a privilege."

"WTC celebrates racial differences and beats whites over the head--what's the point of that?"

"The Center seems regrettably to be a cover for lesbian women seeking the security of religious community."

"WTC is an organization of women exploring theology from a primarily black perspective."

"Will WTC take seriously women of color? Will whites support it less if it does? Will there be white flight here too?"

"WTC made me more conscious of the invisibility of my privileges."

"WTC is consumed by causeism."

"I see less and less in WTC for women who are still within church structures by choice."

"WTC should extensively broaden its Christian roots."

"WTC should focus on poor people's issues without the maternalism."

"WTC is still a space where I am consistently surprised in a soul-shaking way."

"You do not fully know and promote how powerful and wonderful you are!"

"I'm disappointed by a disproportionate amount of programs on racial/ social issues and not on interior growth."

Multiple voices. Commonalities and contradictions. The real world of women, I'd say. Let's not move into denial--we do

do denial well in this late-20th century culture. All perspectives offered in response to the questionnaire and interviews will be taken seriously. They will inform Board members as they determine the shape and substance of an ever more responsive and accountable WTC moving into the future.

After the Board receives a final report on the responses to this self-study, you will hear more about the findings of the study and about WTC's future operations.¹

WTC will definitely be around for the long-haul--hurray!

1. If you want to make sure you hear the results of the study before the next newsletter comes out, send us a self-addressed envelope with three (3) regular stamps on it. Thanks.

My Rival

by Dolores Pickett

I thought about you today and my heart pounded wildly, my chest ached with jealousy, my breath came and went in hurried gasps, my eyes blurred with unshed tears.

You are a formidable rival. Because of you, my fears grow uncontrollably. You must be more beautiful than any other, more sensuous than I could ever be, more compatible than all the women he's ever known. You must be all things familiar and new.

We had a date a 9:00 a.m. but you arrived at 8:51 and 9:00 never came. You were so important that nothing else was needed, not food, or drink, or me. You made his mind hazy, his body crave, his desire alive for you alone.

How I envy you, everything that he is or could be. You control without caring or concern. You appear as a mist, are merged with inhalations, delicious to his heart throbbings and bring spasms and depart leaving nothing except longings to merge with you again and again.

How I hate you for destroying all that he was and could be without a single thought.

You mask your destruction in oblivion and God knows we all want a respite from the daily evils of this world, but I want to rid the world of its evils. Some of us know that we must rid the world of its evils and refuse to escape into your oblivion. Some of us will fight to the death to reveal you for what you are.

You are the great deceiver. You have many names: Unemployment, Poverty, Racism, Sexism, Ageism, Homophobia, and more. Your symptoms are Crime, Violence, Drug and Alcoholism, Sexual Abuse, Murder. The vilest excesses of every description are you. You bring hopelessness and despair. You are a thief and a robber.

You snatch our loved ones and drag them down to deeper pain and disillusionment, but we know that the escape you provide is only momentary. We do not desire escape. We want freedom from you and the violence you perpetrate. We will continue to fight you, and though you give us pain today, tomorrow we will totally destroy you CRACK!

Welcome to Elizabeth Bettenhausen as Study/Action Coordinator

by Donna K. Bivens, WTC Co-Director

It is impossible to write about our joy that Elizabeth Bettenhausen will be coordinating Study/Action next year without saying a word about how brilliantly and lovingly Nancy Richardson has done that work for the past ten years. September is one of the most exciting times at the WTC. When I think of Nancy's leaving, one of the hardest things to imagine is preparing to meet a new Study/Action class without Nancy there guiding us. It is Nancy who has planned the orientation month, tended our relationship with the Episcopal Divinity School, coordinated faculty and field site supervision to maintain the integrity of the program. We will miss her guidance and day-to-day support. Elizabeth Bettenhausen is just the person we needed to step in to coordinate this program. She has much of the expertise we will lose with Nancy: she has taught the Feminist Theology and Theory course for the past four years; she is a pioneer in feminist theological education, and a deeply respected advocate for women in the church (both her own Lutheran church and the church at large) as well as for women outside the Christian tradition and/or of other traditions; she is

diligent, extremely well organized and collaborative in her working style.

I have thoroughly enjoyed working with Elizabeth these past four years. Whether as a teacher, co-learner or colleague Elizabeth is a woman who respects the minds and spirits of women.

She pushes us to stretch and to take ourselves and our own ideas seriously. Sometimes her methodology of questioning and scrutinizing can be unnerving in its directness, but I find it exciting because it really helps me unpack my uncertainties and get clarity. Elizabeth always gives room for one to decide when and where and how to respond. She is as generous in her listening as she is in her questioning. It's great for participants and colleagues to know, as I do, that with Elizabeth it is possible to truly disagree with "the teacher" and not be punished for it! Indeed, with Elizabeth, these very differences often become the basis for our reaching greater understandings of our shared and conflicting realities.

Elizabeth does feminist theology not only with ideas but with art. Her photographs and poetry speak of her passion for theology and justice. She also sees art as central to feminist theology

and theory and to teaching and learning how to "do theology". Her classes are as likely to be in the Museum of Fine Arts or along the Charles River as in our cozy sixth floor classroom.

Finally, Elizabeth is an ethicist who takes on the real world. Her way of bringing together what she believes with how she lives her life makes her a great choice for bringing together the study and action of Study/Action. She helps us keep field sites central to our learning and understanding. She will help us to make sure the learning at the field site is at least as important as our discussions and readings--probably more so.

Welcome, Elizabeth! We appreciate your presence during what will undoubtedly be a challenging transition year.#

Our apologies to
Gloria Kemper-O'Neil
whose name was mistakenly
omitted from our list of
donors to be thanked
in the Dec/92
issue of the newsletter.

WOMEN'S THEOLOGICAL CENTER, P.O. Box 1200, Boston, MA 02117-1200 (617) 536-8782

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___ copies of the **Healing Ritual**. I do / do not want the copies matted. I'm enclosing \$ _____.
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___ My contribution of \$ _____ is enclosed. This represents

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Mending Severed Connections: theological education for communal transformation

by Lynn Nell Rhodes and Nancy D. Richardson

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(Robert McAfee Brown, PSR)

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Published by San Francisco Network Ministries.

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PROCEEDINGS



Proceedings of Whose World? What Order?: Women and the Politics of Faith

a conference sponsored by the WTC in April, 1992

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