

REFLECTIONS ALONG THE WAY

Dear friends,

There's a big birthday on the horizon. In 2020, Christian Associates turns 50! We'll be spending the coming year celebrating all the ways the Holy Spirit has empowered our unity since 1970: helping our region pray together at times of extraordinary joy or pain; incubating new ministries to people experiencing poverty, racism, and incarceration; and speaking as a united voice on the most pressing issues of these times.

But an anniversary isn't only about looking back. This milestone also helps us look forward as we launch our next half-century. We'll be making plans and setting goals, celebrating the next generation of ecumenists, even publishing the next great hymn on Christian unity (see page 1). We have so much still to do together.

Oddly enough, the simple fact that we're planning for the future is a sign of one of the most extraordinary things about Christian Associates: *we're still here.*

In the middle of the twentieth century, most large American cities had their own flourishing and well-funded ecumenical agencies. As the decades passed, however, many of these agencies closed. Others have changed their mission. Most are much diminished from their original scope.

Our God, the God of incarnation and resurrection, God who has brought us this far on the way, is always ready to carry us into the future.

And the remaining organizations? Well, conventional wisdom would have it that ecumenical institutions are irrelevant and outdated. They exist mostly out of habit. They're not engaged in any cutting-edge ministries. The real action is elsewhere; the world has moved on. In other words, ecumenical agencies are dinosaurs, just one good asteroid away from extinction.

But here's what I've learned about dinosaurs during my tenure at Christian Associates. If you have a healthy and happy dinosaur in your care – if you keep your dinosaur well fed and nourished – if you can keep your dinosaur thriving while the rest shuffle off to the Great Dinosaur Beyond, an amazing thing happens: your dinosaur is suddenly unique. Your boring old dinosaur suddenly seems like a one-of-a-kind magical dragon. *And who wouldn't want to ride a dragon into the future?*

There's another way to think about dinosaurs too. In October, I attended "A Day with Brian McLaren," an event organized by Beaver-Butler Presbytery, with participants from at least seven of our member judicatories. The Rev. Dr. McLaren, a pastor and author, recently spent time in the Galapagos Islands, where Charles Darwin was inspired to write *Origin of the Species*. Darwin's observations about evolution led McLaren to consider what will happen to the dinosaurs we see in today's church: our old-fashioned congregations, our legacy institutions. Like many dinosaurs, some will be ill-adapted to changing times, and their stories will come to an end.

But not all dinosaurs went extinct. Some changed. Little by little, generation after generation, some dinosaurs grew feathers. They developed hollow bones. Their reptilian snouts turned into beaks. Some dinosaurs learned how to fly.

Just as dinosaurs evolved into birds, so too do our church dinosaurs face the possibility of new and vibrant life before us, especially if we rise to the challenge of change. Our God, the God of incarnation and resurrection, God who has brought us this far on the way, is always ready to carry us into the future. We just need to flap our newly-evolved wings, use our holy gift of creativity, and join the Spirit in flight.

In 2020, as we look toward Christian Associates' next half-century, I hope we'll look up to see a flock of dragons taking to the sky, as our churches, our judicatories, and even this gray-haired ecumenical agency adapt and evolve, following the Spirit's leadings.

Your sister in Christ,

The Rev. Liddy Barlow
Executive Minister
Christian Associates of Southwest PA

*joining the Spirit
in flight . . .*



photo by Jennifer McKinney

