

# IN THE VINE UNION WITH CHRIST



A  
COMMUNION  
OF LOVE

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WITH CHRIST

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THE CONFIDENT  
WOMAN

Jen Beechey



# ishah

Woman (Hebrew *ishah*). Woman, with man, was made in the image of God. 'Male and female he created them' (Genesis 1:27).

welcome...

*The question of what it means to be 'in union with Christ' is likely to generate numerous answers, from the intensely experiential to the precisely theological. Sparked initially by considering John Calvin's ideas on the topic, this issue of ishah attempts to look at both ends of that spectrum. 'Spectrum' is not necessarily the right word, of course, because experience and theology are not mutually exclusive, as you will find as you read the articles contained here.*

*As always, ishah makes no claim to have exhausted this topic - indeed, it is broad enough to fill several issues of our magazine. The aim is to encourage you, our readers, to consider what 'union with Christ' means for you, and provide a biblical basis for that thinking.*

*If you have any comments on the articles printed here, please do contact us - we'd love to hear from you.*

Alex Pierce for the *ishah* team

## ISSUES TO COME...

ISSUE 27:

What's Your Mindset? Dealing with Mental Health Issues

ISSUE 28:

Worship: Worthy is the Lamb

## our aims

1. To value the Bible as God's inspired Word to us and the ultimate authority on matters of faith and practice, through thinking hard about how the Bible applies to our everyday lives.
2. To encourage women to grow in godliness and maturity in Christ.
3. To equip Christian women to be creative, confident and effective in communicating the gospel.
4. To give women in a variety of roles and situations the forum to think about contemporary issues from a framework of Biblical theology and to articulate their thinking in a manner that stimulates themselves and others to live lives that are more faithful to God's Word.

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BY JILL FIRTH

*Sap travels through the branches of a vine bringing nourishment and life.*

*A branch is torn off one olive tree and grafted on to another.*

*A beloved guest comes to dwell in a friend's home.*

*Supporters gather around a meal table and pledge allegiance to their host.*

*A trusted friend is so close, she is like a person's own right arm.*

*The mind of one person is shared with another person so that they think alike.*

*A man and a woman commit themselves to one another in marriage.*

*A woman joins herself sexually to her husband.*

The New Testament uses many different images to describe the union between Christ and Christians. We are described as being branches of a vine or olive tree (John 15:5, Romans 11:17–24); a home in which the Trinity comes to dwell (John 14:23); partakers in a sacramental meal (1 Corinthians 10:16–22); part of Christ's body (1 Corinthians 12:12, 27). We are given the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16). The relationship of Christ and the church is like marriage (Ephesians 5:23, 29–32). Our union with Christ is intimate: in some sense like the sexual union between a man and a woman (1 Corinthians 6:15–17).

The idea of union with Christ can seem unfamiliar to some Christians. We know that Christ died for us to enable forgiveness of sins, so that we might be made right with God. It is as though we were guilty as charged in a court of law, and the judge paid the fine so that we could be set free and not have to pay the penalty for our own sins. This change in our legal status before God is often referred to as justification—God now regards us as if we are righteous, because the righteousness of Christ has been imputed to us. Some like to think

of this justification as 'just-as-if-I'd-never-sinned'. It is a free gift of God.

But God does not only want to forgive us, He also wants to reconcile us. The purpose of Christ's taking of our sin is reconciliation with God (2 Corinthians 5:18–21). Our eternal destiny is to be always with the Lord (John 17:24, 1 Thessalonians 4:17, Ephesians 2:6); to see him face to face (1 Corinthians 13:12). The Spirit's indwelling in the present is described as a pledge, a guarantee (Ephesians 1:13–14) or the first fruits of the full future glory of our relationship with God (Romans 8:9–30). Our union with Christ now is a foretaste of our future heavenly relationship.

Some Christians overestimate this present relationship with God: they do not remember that we are to live in hope of what we have not yet fully received

to indwell the believer (John 14:23, 17). Instead of seeing our relationship with God as static and distant, it can help us to see a dynamic, relational movement of the Father in the Son, the Son in the Father, the Son in us, us in the Son, the Spirit of God in us.

God is not 'out there' to be shouted to in prayer as if He were very far away. The Holy Spirit dwells within us, helping us to pray (Romans 8:26). He is like a go-between between us and God, telling God what our deepest needs are and then reassuring us that we are God's beloved children. We can pray confidently and without fear.

The Christian understanding of union with God is significantly different from understandings in contemporary culture. The ideas of 'merging with the divine' or that there is a 'god' within every person

*"Our union with Christ now is a foretaste of our future heavenly relationship"*

(Romans 8:23–25). Others, anxious about claiming too much, underestimate the possibilities of our present relationship with God. They see Christ as outside themselves, and do not realise that the Spirit of God already lives within them (Romans 8:9).

Chapters 14 to 17 of John are one of the richest sources of our understanding of our union with God. The interrelationship of the Father, Son and Spirit has been likened to the movements of a great dance within the Trinity. The Son is in the Father and the Father in the Son (John 17:21). We are invited into this harmony through our relationship with Jesus (John 17:23). Christ abides in us and we are to abide in Christ (John 15:4). The Father, the Son and the Spirit will come

are popular concepts. Peak experiences achieved in meditation or spontaneously arising in special moments of everyday life are sometimes described as 'union with God'.

**We are not merged with the essence of God**

The Bible never uses the image of a drop of water merging with the ocean to describe the reality of a person's union with God. The images are of adoption (Ephesians 1:5, Romans 8:15), grafting (Romans 11:17), and being a part of Christ's body (1 Corinthians 12:27). God does not want us to lose our personality. Our union with God is a communion of love, not a merging of a finite person with the infinite. My friend has a lime tree onto

which she has grafted a different variety of lime, which produces the lime leaves used in cooking. The graft produces its own distinctive leaves and fruit. The original tree keeps the graft alive as well as producing original type limes. My friend loves the limes from the main tree and also the lime leaves from the graft. It would destroy the purpose of the graft if the grafted part produced the same leaves and fruit as the original tree. God loves us as individuals, in our union with God, our individuality is preserved.

#### **Human beings do not become 'god'**

Some people believe that there is a divine spark within us, which is seeking to reunite with God. They believe that somehow this spark has been trapped in our material bodies, but union with God is achieved when the spiritual spark can be freed from the physical body and find its true home in God. The Bible teaches that both body and spirit are good in God's eyes (Genesis 1:26-31). The body is not just a prison that the human spirit has to escape from to be with God. As we live our lives, we can know that God loves our bodies as well as our minds and our spirits. Our whole life is to be lived to His glory, including the life of the body.

#### **God is *in* every person, but only those who trust in Jesus are *united* to God forever**

In one sense, God is within every person. God sustains and upholds every person along with every plant, animal and inanimate thing in the universe (Hebrews 1:3). Paul referred to this when he told the people of Ephesus that God was not far from them, and that they were living and moving and having their being in God (Acts 17:22-28). In this general sense, God's power is within every person as they are kept alive by God. We can celebrate and treasure this closeness of God as he sustains us in our everyday lives.

God also offers each of us a more personal indwelling. God became a human being and lived among us in the person of Jesus (John 1:14). Jesus was not just temporarily a human being. He has taken his resurrected body with him to heaven where he is now seated at the Father's right hand. In fact, the Bible says it is Jesus who is now sustaining the universe (Hebrews 1:3, Colossians 1:17). Because Jesus is both God and human, he is the meeting point of God and humanity (Ephesians 2:16, 18). We are invited into the fellowship of the Trinity as we are joined to him. The Spirit comes to live within us like a houseguest or companion (John 14:17, 1 Corinthians 6:17). This amazing intimacy is offered to anyone who puts their trust in Jesus (John 14:23). He cleanses and forgives us so that we can be united to God (Romans 6:1-14). In addition, union with Christ is corporate. We are not only joined to Christ as individuals, but also to one another as members of his body (Ephesians 2:15-22).

#### **Longing for God can draw us to God**

We may experience the love of God through peak experiences, or in the tiny details of everyday life. Watching a sunset, seeing the birth of a baby, seeing a green shoot come up through the soil may give us a sense of being more fully alive, or of wonder and joy and worship of God. These experiences are sometimes described as a feeling of being united with God, or with all creation. Such experiences may enable us to become aware of God, and may lead us to experience a longing for God, or even a sense of having our longings satisfied. These experiences in themselves do not create a permanent bond of union with God. Lasting union with God is only possible in Christ, through the Spirit. But as we taste the love of God in these experiences, we can reach out for a

lasting relationship with God which will be sustained through death, and into life beyond death.

Jesus invites us to become united to him so that he can share his own life with us forever. Indeed, we are invited into the fellowship of the Trinity. We do not discover the 'god' within us, but rather we welcome God as he comes to unite himself to our spirit by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. In time, our body, mind and spirit will go to be with the Lord, but even now we can enjoy a personal relationship with him. Jesus said, 'I am the vine; you are the branches'. 'Remain in me and I will remain in you' (John 15: 5, 4).

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■ *Jill Firth is an ordained Anglican minister who is interested in prayer and helping people relate to God. She is currently working in the parish of St John's West Brunswick in Melbourne.*



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# WORKING IN THE VINEYARD

BY ANDREA WINTERS MILEO



Walking amongst grape vines at any time of the year is a dynamic experience as I sense the life and potential they hold within. What will this year's growth bring us, what will the fruit be like and what testimonies will the wine tell us when it is finished? Another year of vine maturity, of roots digging deeper in the soil, the weather and our viticulture all play a role in the finished wine, and no two years are ever the same. We grow Pinot Noir on our property, and it is a most interesting and expressive grape variety. In the eleventh century AD the Cistercian Monks are recorded to have tended Pinot Noir as they saw it as their role in life to express the voice of God through the soil and the vine. This is where our journey becomes exciting!

Ultimately growing wine grapes is a labour of love and immense passion as well as a science. It's hard to find any other work more encompassing of the mind, body and soul than agriculture. When the Holy Grail is to produce the best of the best wine, then the work for the viticulturalist (vine tender) becomes a relationship with the vine.

Working with the vines throughout the annual life cycle of the vine is a journey from the death of winter, to the sparkling new birth of spring shoots, the vigorous growth phase, to the reproduction and fruit set, and finally, that moment when the ripe fruit is the best it can be; and then harvest. Harvesting the grapes triggers the leaves to begin turning the colours of autumn. This is the time for the final, critical stage of pruning, which provides the foundation for the next season's fruit and ensures the vines grow from strength to strength. It is a work that is completed through the long barren months of winter, vine after vine, row after row, pruning by hand.

These times provide an opportunity to reflect on the seasons of life and ponder some of the analogies about grape vines found in the Bible. While seemingly endless and monotonous, the winter pruning allows time for mental and spiritual processing. It is often a testing time. Then the birth of spring growth brings a surge of hope and new focus, as the pristine leaves sprout forth like a celebration. It is a reminder of the promise of new beginnings, of maturity, growth and life that follow difficult times, as we remain nourished by Jesus.

In John 15, Jesus says 'I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that bears fruit he prunes so that it will become more fruitful'. This analogy is just so accurate. Each vine needs to be pruned according to its individual growth pattern. Without any pruning the vine quickly becomes wild and diseased with poor fruit. Pruning the right way creates the opportunity for the best expression of health and fruit. Pruning the wrong way can kill a vine.

As followers of Jesus I believe we long to 'produce good fruit' in our lives. Yet how often do we struggle in vain to be independent? It is only after we wither that we realise why we are feeling so destitute. Personally, I fear those pruning secateurs, and yet this is how I know God loves me. I have learned in a powerful way about the love of God for me as He has expertly (and sometimes painfully) pruned areas of my life with the intricacy, skill and knowledge that only one who loves me could employ. It is so I can reach my potential, that person I deeply long to be. Who else has such an intimate knowledge of my needs and a hope for my life? God is prepared to do the tough work so I can flourish.

During extreme environmental conditions branches can suffer, fruit capacity is often reduced and leaves can wither and die. The relationship between the vine and the vine tender is tested to the maximum. When the vineyard is managed well however, these conditions can produce the most intensely flavoured, prized grapes. I think there is an analogy here. Hard times may prevail in our lives, and we may suffer enormously, yet as we remain in Jesus, as we receive nourishment from Him, our fruit can produce the most prized and fragrant wine.

■ *Andrea Winters Mileo is the Sales and Marketing Manager for Voice of the Vine vineyard, owned by her family. She is also studying Wine Science part-time. Andrea is married with two daughters, and she and her family attend St Columbs Anglican church in Hawthorn. Feel free to email Andrea on [andrea@voiceofthevine.com.au](mailto:andrea@voiceofthevine.com.au)*

# WHY I LOVE THE DOCTRINE OF UNION WITH CHRIST (AND HOW THE PURITANS HELPED ME TO LOVE IT)

BY JEAN WILLIAMS

Union with Christ, for me, is one of the most wonderful doctrines of all. It became a personal favourite over ten years ago, when I researched the Puritan quest for enjoyment of God for my PhD. These words by the Puritan John Owen (1659) have echoed in my heart ever since:

[U]nion is the foundation of all...communion we have with God...Our communion...with God consists in his communication of himself to us, with our return to him of that which he requires and accepts, flowing from that union which in Jesus Christ we have with him. (pp 8-9)

Owen reminded me of what I already knew from the Bible: while feelings of communion with God come and go, my union with Christ has been complete from the moment I became a Christian.

I'm a perfectionist and an introvert. I can spend hours dissecting my inner states, mulling over my sins, and feeling guilty for real or imagined inadequacies. Doubt creeps up when I'm exhausted and finding it hard to pray (i.e. whenever I'm pregnant or caring for a baby—most of the last eight years!) and when I'm struggling with sin and worldliness (ditto). 'Maybe I'm not really a Christian...Do I really want to obey God?...Wouldn't a real Christian be further along by now?' Again and again I return to the reality that Christ died for me; that he paid for my sins, past, present and future (Hebrews 10:19-23); and that nothing I can do (short of disowning Christ) can interrupt my union with him.

Union with Christ also brings me—and, wonder of wonders, God—great joy. I vividly remember my amazement when I first read these words, also by Owen:

"He rejoices with singing;" as one that is fully satisfied in that object he has fixed his love on...To have joy of heart in gladness, is the highest expression of delight in love...It is to exult in outward demonstration of internal delight and joy...to leap, as men overcome with some joyful surprise...To rejoice with gladness of heart, to exult with singing and praise, argues the greatest delight...possible (quoting Zephaniah 3:17; p25).

God does not need me, but I am precious to him, and he rejoices over me, even with singing! As for me, I know that Jesus is my deepest joy. I often feel discouraged, spiritually dry, and out of touch with him. But deep in my heart is a longing, not so much for joy, but for Christ himself. I can't imagine life without him! Christ is my brother, my lover, my husband, my Lord and my God.

My life is one long love-affair of union with Christ. The Puritans could get pretty 'raunchy' (at least it sounds that way to modern ears) when they talked about union with Christ:

Is Jesus Christ precious to you?...Is your whole heart filled with the sweet smell of Jesus Christ?...Does the very thinking of Christ ravish your heart? Does the naming of him carry your soul almost above itself in an ecstasy of love? Is he like an apple to your taste, that your mouth is filled with the sweetness of his juice?...Are you melted with his love? (quoting Song of Songs 2:3-5, interpreted as an allegory of union with Christ; Collinges, 1650:49)

The Puritans taught me—a staid evangelical!—that it's appropriate to feel deeply about union with Christ. Emotions are not central, and cannot be controlled or summoned at will. But there are times when my mind is overwhelmed, and my emotions overcome, by the incomprehensible wonder and inexpressible joy of Christ's love for me.

Union with Christ gives me certain hope for the future. Because my union with Christ is complete and unbreakable, I confidently look forward to the time when my communion with Christ will finally be all that it can be.

O bottomless depth, and earnest confluence of all joys, pleasures, sweetness, delights...!...a boundless ocean of endless sweetness, and inexplicable joy arising in the soul from the sight of God...[I]nfinite desire expires in the bosom of God, and...lies...down softly...in the embracements of everlasting bliss (Bolton, 1626:221-223).

The day will come when I will see God's people beautifully dressed like a bride for her husband; when I share in the wedding feast of the Lamb; when Christ takes his Bride, the Church, to himself for all eternity (Revelation 19, 21). I will see God face to face, and the Lamb who was slain seated at His right hand. On that day, with all the company of heaven, I will kneel before the Lamb and shout his praises. On that great day I, along with all God's people, will find my deepest longings finally filled and completely satisfied by Christ alone.

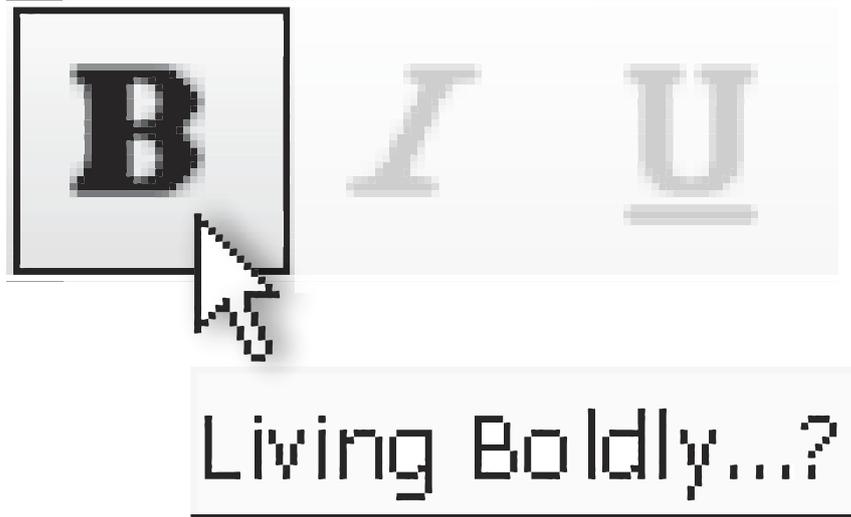
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■ In 1997, Jean Williams finished her history PhD thesis, *The Puritan quest for enjoyment of God: An analysis of the theological and devotional writings of Puritans in seventeenth century England, on the 17th century English Puritans, mainly Richard Sibbes and John Owen*.



**Book Review:**  
***The Confident Woman:***  
***Start Today Living Boldly and Without Fear***  
 by Joyce Meyer  
 Published by Faith Words, New York, 2006

BY JEN BEECHEY

I think that a lack of confidence is something that plagues women. So when I went looking for a book to review by a popular Christian female author, this seemed like something that might have wide appeal and be something I could get into.

Although not a big fan of hers, I have some admiration for her since reading this book. Joyce Meyer has come from an abusive background, but after choosing to follow Jesus, she began a long journey of healing. She is now thriving as the head of a multinational teaching and preaching ministry. The transformation she has experienced in her own life certainly gives her the credibility to say, 'If I can be confident, so can you.'

So what does she actually say? How can a woman be confident and 'start living boldly and without fear'? Joyce starts in a really good place: our confidence is ultimately based on our understanding of our position in Christ. Created and saved, we have phenomenal value, which no one can take away and nothing can change. It is Christ, and nothing from ourselves, that is the basis for confidence.

Joyce goes on with lots of good tips, practical ideas and helpful case studies of people who have been confident in the face of difficulty. In the chapter 'seven secrets of a confident woman', Joyce says that 'a confident woman avoids comparisons'. An important point, she says that 'I found myself always comparing myself with someone, and in the process rejecting and disapproving of the person God created me to be' (p48). She encourages us to be content with who we are. Joyce also gives helpful overviews of arguments for women to be involved in various kinds of ministry and why we are not inferior to men. This is not a rigorous exposition, but would have some encouragement for a lot of us when we are surrounded by men who think God ordained them to make the decisions and take the lead.

I did not finish the book. Most of the second half is about fear, and I personally find it unhelpful to dwell on fear. There were some useful ideas—for example, the chapter

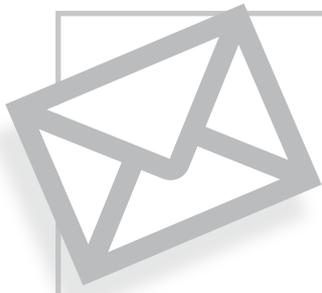
on 'doing it afraid' contains the good advice that we can feel fear but we don't have to be held back by it.

Joyce's theology is a little on the woolly side, in particular as she subscribes to 'me' theology. It concerns me when I hear people say, 'God has a plan for my life'. God's plans are not for or about me, but about reconciling the world to Himself, and He invites me to be a part of that plan. It seems to me that Joyce is saying that God's purposes are for me, for my success. 'My personal success' and 'what my confidence in God can do for me', seem overemphasised. Case studies in the book are mainly of people who are successful in 'worldly' terms. Christian martyrs and faithful people who struggled for years for small gains for the Kingdom do not seem to feature in this book. Jesus' own example of success included a painful and humiliating death on a cross, and he said we were to expect similar journeys. I believe his life and death indicate that Kingdom ideas about success are entirely different to other worldviews. I agree with some of Joyce's ideas about how to be confident but I think she has not understood why God would have us be confident and 'successful'.

So, some useful ideas, and a good experience to read something written by a fellow traveller of The Way, who sees the world and God a bit differently. But all in all, it leaves me an ambivalent woman.

■ *Jen Beechey is sometimes a confident woman, and sometimes a fearful one. Longing for the day when all fear is gone, she tries to love her husband Mike and do her work at TEAR the best she can.*





# write of reply

*ishah* welcomes reader responses to topics dealt with in previous issues. These should be no more than 200 words long and can be emailed to [ishahmag@ishah.org](mailto:ishahmag@ishah.org) or posted to *ishah*, c/-56 Collier Cres, Brunswick West, Vic, 3056.

Dear *ishah* eds.,

Thanks for the latest issue on Christians and the Arts. Heidi Feulling ('For His Name's Sake') had some moving stories of people using their art to share the gospel in cross-cultural ministry. She also stated 'art wasn't intended to be about expressing our self and our ideas. We are not the ones worthy; it wasn't us who died on the cross.'

I agree that we must guard against making art for self-promotion and selfish ends. I agree that we are not worthy to die on the cross, yet we *are* worthy to express our selves. This is because we are expressing the unique

person God has created, loved and redeemed. God has made us worthy. And in being creative we show forth the image of our creative God.

I appreciated the article's challenge to ask God how we can best use our gifts for His sake. However, the last paragraph went further than this when it suggested (and perhaps this wasn't intended) that art which is not 'used as a tool to share the gospel' is not really art 'for His name's sake'.

I want to argue for a broader view of art. All creative activity by Christians is able to give glory to God and be done 'for His name's sake', whether or not it explicitly shares the gospel.

If Christ is the true vine, and we are the branches (John 15), then all of our life, including all we create, can be an expression of his fruitfulness working its way out in us.

And if we are not Christian? We are still, though unaware of it, expressing some of the boundless creativity of our creator God, who made us in his image.

Regards,

Cathy Altmann

*Starting Point* is a regular column that aims to encourage readers to engage with a contemporary issue in the media.

## Friends who Deepen our Faith

I've been listening to US President George Bush describe our [then] Prime Minister John Howard as a 'close personal friend', and I've been wondering what the basis for that friendship is? I'm pretty sure they don't call each other that often. They probably only see each other about once a year. I suspect their friendship is based on the political choices that John Howard has made on behalf of Australia, most notably, that we are one of the few remaining countries to support the US in the war against Iraq.

It occurs to me that the word 'friendship' is a lot like the word 'love': a deep term that can also be used superficially. Are people our friends only if they do what we want them to do, or if they see the world our way?

Jesus chose, worked with, taught and prayed with his disciples for three years before he elevated them to the status of friends (John 15:15). His definition of friendship included knowing each other, and being committed to God's purposes. He modelled true friendship, a costly friendship that demanded his own life.

I'm not suggesting that each of us will be required to lay down our lives for our friends, but being friends of others may be costly. Aelred of Rievaulx described Christian friendship as 'being laid on the foundation of God's love', that is, being in touch with the movement of God in each other's lives (Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, 1159). Friendship like that would require us to tell our friend when we think they are making mistakes.

I would love to see two world leaders practise that sort of godly friendship. In the meantime, we should try re-orienting our own friendships. Aelred used to say: 'Here we are, you and I, and I hope a third, Christ, is in our midst.' (Aelred of Rievaulx, 1159).

■ Kara Martin is married to David, is a mother of two and lectures on the spirituality of friendship and a history of Christian spirituality. She is currently studying for her Master of Arts in Christian Studies. Her past lives include running a Bible college, television journalism and being a management consultant. You can contact her at [kara.adina@gmail.com](mailto:kara.adina@gmail.com)

