

7

STUDIES

Barbara Pell and the Christianity and Literature Study Group

by Deane Downey

The idea of establishing a special study group to foster dialogue on the interface between Christianity and Literature was first raised during an informal exchange among several similar-minded ACUTE members during the Congress of Learned Societies at the University of Manitoba in May, 1986. Deane Downey (Trinity Western University) offered to compile a list of Canadian academics who might be interested in such a group.

The starting point in developing such a list was to identify the Canadian members of the Conference on Christianity and Literature, an adjunct society of the U.S.-based Modern Language Association. Downey had recently met Diane Edwards, a member of the University of Victoria's English department who was on the CCL international executive. Edwards was warmly supportive of the idea of founding a group of Canadian academics interested in the relation between literature and Christianity, and provided that list in short order.

An organizational luncheon meeting was planned for the May 1987 meetings of ACUTE at McMaster University. With the strong support and involvement of McMaster English department chair Laurel Braswell-Means, as well as the cooperation of Redeemer College's English department chair Hugh Cook, that meeting took place on May 26th. Seventeen people attended, representing twelve Canadian post-secondary institutions. An additional sixteen had sent their regrets but joined the attendees in strongly supporting the establishment of such an entity. As an adjunct to ACUTE (supported by everyone as an important dependent connection), those in attendance agreed to call it the Christianity and Literature Study Group.

A tentative suggestion was made to have CLSG deemed a Canadian affiliate of CCL. That proposal garnered a less than enthusiastic response. Rather, it was agreed to hold two or three sessions in conjunction with the 1988 ACUTE meetings at the University of Windsor. From the beginning, a commitment was made to the principle of scheduling the CLSG meetings so as not to conflict with the ACUTE program. It was also agreed to estab-

lish a voluntary annual membership fee of \$5 (raised to \$10 the following year for regular full-time academics but kept at \$5 for graduate students/retirees/underemployed) to cover mailing costs and other incidental expenses. (These were the days before the wonderful advent of email communication, which development several years later eliminated the need for membership fees!)

A steering committee was established at this organizational luncheon meeting: Deane Downey (TWU) as chair, Cory Davies (Huron College) as secretary, and both Diane Edwards (U. Vic.) and Douglas Loney (Redeemer College) as members at large. It was agreed to issue a general call for papers for presentation at the 1988 University of Windsor "Learneds" in such fields of inquiry as the Bible and Literature, literary works by self-acknowledged Christian authors, and the influence of the Bible on secular writers and their work. A suggestion was also made that an informal evening be organized involving a panel discussion of one or two appropriate articles, circulated in advance.

It turned out that two CLSG sessions took place at the Windsor meetings, one involving the reading of two papers and the other a business meeting. Paper presenters were Jim Doelman (McMaster), "The Word in the Fiction of Rudy Wiebe," and Victor Yelverton Haines (Dawson College), "Exemplification as the Basis for All Allegory and Applied Typology in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." At the business meeting, those present were pleased to learn that the membership of the group had grown to 40 people.

From its inception, CLSG founders were encouraged in their endeavours by a number of people in positions of academic leadership: the aforementioned Laurel Braswell-Means, chair of English at McMaster; David Williams, chair of English at McGill; Douglas Wurtele, editor for a number of years of ACUTE/ACCUTE's *English Studies in Canada*, and Mary Elizabeth Smith, chair of the Division of Humanities and Languages at UNB (St. John campus). Each one made their support explicit by reading at least one paper at one of the CSLG sessions during the organization's formative years. During that time, the group also enjoyed the ready cooperation of ACUTE president Thomas Cleary (U.Vic.) in the publication of CLSG's call for papers and announcement of meeting times in the parent organization's Newsletter.

CLSG undertook a number of rather ambitious projects during its early years, due in part to the fact that many of its supporters were unable to attend the annual Learned Societies meetings. An additional logistical challenge was that a number of non-ACUTE members were interested in

the group—e.g., from the Society of Biblical Literature and from the Canadian Philosophical Association. The meetings of these organizations did not necessarily coincide with those of ACUTE. One CLSG project was to prepare an annotated bibliography (limited to ten items per person) of recent publications by members. The first of these bibliographies, 13 pages in length, appeared in April, 1989; twenty-four CLSG members were represented. Volume 2 appeared in July, 1990, 18 pages, involving items from 30 members. Unfortunately, this worthy annual project did not continue, primarily because of compiler Downey's distraction with a textbook editing project.

As the years passed, interest in CLSG's activities continued to flourish. The group's programs became more and more ambitious (albeit still never conflicting with announced ACUTE activities). At Laval University in May, 1989, Carleton's Douglas Wurtele's invited discussion paper, "Augustinian Theological Aspects of Spenser's *Book of Holiness*," was complemented by a round-table discussion two days later on the topic "Christian Responses to Deconstruction." Participants were invited to read seven pre-announced articles in preparation for that discussion.

By the 1992 meetings at UPEI, the CLSG program had grown to include one pre-arranged panel discussion (on "The Implications of a Christian Worldview on Pedagogy") and seven read papers (presented at three sessions). At the 1999 meetings at Sherbrooke/Bishop's Universities, 15 papers were read during five sessions, with a sixth meeting devoted to a special session on Bruce Cockburn presented by two invited speakers, Brian Walsh (Wycliffe) and Richard Middleton (Colgate Rochester). Papers touched upon a rich diversity of topics, from Sarah Emsley (Dalhousie), "What is Dinah's Duty? Religion and Sympathy in *Adam Bede*," to Jens Zimmerman (TWU), "Trusting the Word: Communicative Ethics, Language, and Literature," and Margo Swiss (York), "Taming Sorrow: Grief Work in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*."

At its meetings at Carleton University's Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences in May, 2009, no fewer than seven sessions involved the reading of 22 papers. Once again, the range of topics was impressive: from Krista Lysack (Western Ontario), "Christina Rossetti's Devotional Reading," to Canadian Research Professor Di Brandt (Brandon), "So this is the world & here I am in it," Gordon Johnston (Trent), "Reading Margaret Avison's Poetry," Emily Hill (McMaster), "Can Prime Evil Be Forgiven?: The Possibility/Impossibility of Forgiveness in Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela's *A Human Being Died That Night*," and Anthony Raspa (Laval), "Love and Beauty in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*."

Much to the surprise (but also delight) of most of the CLSG initiators, the Christianity and Literature Study Group continues to thrive. ACCUTE now graciously publishes the annual CLSG program in the same pamphlet as its own program. The CLSG email list now exceeds 200 names. Attendance at the various CLSG multiple-paper sessions often exceeds attendance at many ACCUTE sessions; for example, average attendance at each session in the past two years has been between 18 and 24.

Without question a large portion of the credit for the continuing vitality of CLSG over its first 22-year history can be attributed to the enthusiastic leadership of Trinity Western University's Barbara Pell, who departed from this life 9 March 2009. Barbara was in attendance at the founding luncheon meeting at McMaster in May, 1987. At the May, 1988 meeting at the University of Windsor she agreed to take the Minutes of the Annual Business Meeting and also to serve as Downey's assistant. At the 1989 Laval University meeting she was chosen to serve as Secretary and also Meetings Coordinator. At the 1990 CLSG business meeting Barbara was appointed as Chair of the Steering Committee, with Irwin Streight (Queen's) as Meeting Arrangements Coordinator and Downey as Newsletter Editor.

At both the 1991 and 1992 meetings Pell and Downey were designated as CLSG co-chairs, but the Minutes of the UPEI meeting make clear who had the significantly heavier set of responsibilities: "Barbara will look after arrangements for next year's meetings at Carleton, including calling for and arranging for the vetting of papers, making room reservations, corresponding with speakers, setting up the program, chairing the sessions, etc.; Deane will look after the membership list, finances, mailings to members, newsletter, annotated bibliographies." At the same meeting the attendees were informed that between 80 and 90 names were on the CLSG membership list (although only 32 of those had paid-up fees!). Just a couple of years later, the fee levy was dropped because of the advent of email communication. It followed that an annual business meeting also was deemed unnecessary.

Barbara continued her dedicated leadership of CLSG until health challenges obliged her to hand over her duties to others. The husband-wife team of David Kent (Centennial College) and Margo Swiss (York U.) supervised the 2006 meetings at York in Barbara's absence (owing to illness) and then were asked by Barbara to take over the CLSG leadership. Barbara's involvement with the group, however, did not end at that point; she astonished everyone present by delivering her last CLSG paper (on Brian Moore) as well as hosting a poetry reading at the UBC meetings in May, 2008, in spite of the fact that she had undergone brain cancer surgery

just a few weeks before. Her example clearly is inspiring Kent and Swiss to carry on the fine tradition she established, for in many ways both the 2009 Carleton and 2010 Concordia meetings were among the best ever. (We are sure the thought occurred to many: “Barbara would have loved this!”)

We honour our esteemed colleague Barbara Pell’s memory and continue to be inspired by her outstanding example of enthusiastic commitment both to the advancement of literary studies in general as well as to serious (and not always academy-endorsed) reflection on the interface between serious literature and the Christian faith. Barbara was honoured at the Concordia Congress in 2010 with a special session on Canadian literature in her honour, the papers for which formed the basis of this special issue of David Bentley’s *Canadian Poetry* dedicated to her memory.