

Deborah Sokolove, David Lloyd, and Margreta Silverstone: A Cross and A Banner

by Deborah Sokolove

On the fiftieth day after the Passover, now as well as in the time of Jesus, Jews the world over celebrate Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks. With Passover and Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), Shavuot is one of the three great pilgrimage festivals explicitly commanded in Leviticus. Known also as the Festival of the First Fruits, this was the celebration of the early harvest, the bringing in of the winter wheat. So the Jewish people gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate and to sacrifice. Those who had heard of Jesus were together in one place, and with a sound like rushing wind "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability...And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each."

Since that time, Christians have gathered to celebrate on Pentecost, a word derived from the Greek for "fifty", for the fiftieth day after Easter. And, reciting the passage from Acts that we just heard, we too often forget that the Word of God is not simply words, and that language is not just that which is spoken or read. As we just saw, dance is also a language, and music, and poetry. The Word of God is not simply spoken, but felt and moved and played and seen.

Most of you know that, in addition to being an artist, I work as the Director of the Dadian Gallery at Wesley Theological

Seminary. As a staff member of the Center for the Arts and Religion there, I am often called upon to talk about the relationship between art and theology, and about the ways that the arts may be used in praise, proclamation, and prayer. But although it is clear that Seekers values the arts and the artists among us, I rarely speak here about my own call as an artist, preferring generally to let the work speak for itself.

What I try to do, what I want to do, is to make art that is beautiful to look at, that virtually anybody can understand (at least at some level), and that makes visible the invisible yearnings of community. A few weeks ago, Sonya asked me why I thought we needed this processional cross and banner, which were first presented at Easter, and have been, rather casually, in various parts of the room since then. I felt her question as a kind of challenge, since it was clear that she (and perhaps many of you) were uncomfortable with the kind of symbols that have been used in many churches to mark the separation between "important" clergy and "unimportant" laity. So, gathering my courage, I told her how they came to be made, and when I was done, she suggested that I share the story, so that these symbols might become not simply something pretty that were made by talented members of the congregation, but – as they were intended to be – part of our common life together.

Something more than a year ago, about the time that we became a separately incorporated church, the core members were talking about how we could establish our identity, independent of the Church of the Saviour. There were two proposals: one, that we could have a brochure to hand out to people who might be interested – you can get copies of the brochure upstairs in the World Room; and, two, that we should have a sign to put on the front door on Sunday mornings. Keith proposed that Seekers commission me to make that sign, and this was affirmed by those present. I felt honored, and humbled, and had no idea what the sign should look like.

Several months went by, and I had done nothing visible, not even a sketch. So, early last year, I asked for a group to gather with me, to come with ideas and with vision, to help me pray a sign into existence. About ten Seekers gathered one Sunday after church, and we talked about what a sign meant, about a symbol for Seekers. There were many ideas, many suggestions, but mostly there was trust that whatever I came up would be just fine. One suggestion, however, I took to heart – that I should work with the others in Seekers who might want to make things for our worship life, for our life together. Margarita was at that meeting, and we briefly talked about her making a banner, perhaps to hang out of the tower-room window.

Eventually, thanks to the prayers and support of many Seekers, I did make the sign, and it now hangs on the front door. It is hard to read, though, and I was not sure even as I made it that it was what was needed. I was sure, however, that we would not be able to take with us this wonderful cross that hangs on the wall, made by Jimilu Mason, because it isn't really ours. And, I thought, our Sunday worship might be in a place so temporary, so not-ours, that we couldn't hang anything permanent or large, but we still would want a cross that we all could see.

So I began to think about making a portable cross, one that could be easily carried from place to place, and set up as needed. There is evidence that as early as the 4th century, such crosses were used to identify groups of Christians as they went from one church to another, much as a signboard or a pennant is used by a tour group leader in the airport. I felt that, as we were on the move, we would need something that would say "here, in this place, wherever we gather, we are the people of God, the Body of Christ." And that we needed it soon, so that it would become familiar, "ours," long before we left Mass. Ave..

So, this new cross contains, as our connection to Scripture,

the opening verses of Genesis and of John, the verses that start "In the Beginning...". Pointing toward the future, if you look hard enough, you might see photos of Covey and of Caren, two of our youngest Seekers. The present is represented by a photo of all of us during Circle Time, and another of us in here, at prayer. You might also see a faint echo of Jimilu's cross, and the ship-and-waves motif from our collection plate and communion vessels. And if you look again, you might see the image of Christ, who, though risen, is always being crucified wherever people are abused, or tortured, or starving, or hated.

As I was thinking about the cross, I began to think, too, of the times that we have participated in public demonstrations, such as Stand for Children, and how hard it is to carry that broad, white banner with our name on it, in a crowd. So, I talked to Margreta, and asked her if she would be interested in making a banner for Seekers, a symbol of our particular history and future. She agreed, and then I cajoled David, who had previously made the wooden holders for our Communion cups, to make the wooden parts for both the cross and the banner. In a few minutes, they will tell you their part of the story.

But the cross and the banner are not really finished. Today, some of us will tie ribbons to the wooden supports, dedicating these symbols to the life of the community. From time to time, perhaps you will want to add a ribbon, in memory of some event in the life of Seekers. Over time, some of the ribbons will become shabby and ragged, but, I hope, there will always be new ones, binding us to one another, speaking in tongues of color and form, waving in the breathing wind of the Spirit of God.

Making The Processional Cross And Banner Stand

by David Lloyd

When Deborah asked me to make a processional cross and a banner stand for Seekers, I hesitated. In fact, I think I said no. I have worked harder this fall and early winter than I ever have in my life. For those of you who don't know, part of my job entails convening, managing, and sometimes leading special teams of investigators, social workers, physicians and others to assist a military installation when there is a case of multiple victim child sexual abuse that occurred in a school, child development center, youth program, or family child care. We had gone 18 months without any, and beginning at Labor Day we have had 5, of which I led two and had responsibilities for managing the other 3 from a distance and their follow up. In addition, I was planning a policy conference on spouse abuse for February and trying to get several policy directives coordinated through the Pentagon, which is a long and difficult process. All this on top of the many everyday tasks.

It was all too much and this just seemed like more work. But then I thought of how much Deborah has meant to me, how much I have learned from being with her in the Learners and Teachers mission group and from hearing her preach. How could I say no to Deborah? Maybe some of you have felt the same way when she has asked you something. And then I thought, I have chosen not to get too deeply involved in the search for new space. Regardless of where we go, we can use a processional cross and a banner stand to help claim the new space as ours. And I also thought, I like the idea of a processional cross. I have memories of a processional with cross in the worship at Foundry Methodist Church here in D.C., where I frequently worshipped during my college years, and also at the Washington Cathedral, where I occasionally worshipped then, and during

the religious festivals at Ethiopian Orthodox churches during my Peace Corps days.

Plus, when I heard that Margreta, a sister member of the Learners and Teachers, was going to make the banner, I really wanted to make them. So I said, yes, I'd make them. They would be my gifts to Seekers.

During the late fall and around Christmas time I really felt pressured to start, but I was working too hard to have any left over energy. Then I began to feel the pressure of needing to get started because they were intended for Palm Sunday and I only had a few weekends that would be warm enough and that weren't already filled with other planned activities. I have to do my carpentry projects outside or in our little shed, which is unheated and which needs the door open to take the dust out. I have a terrible dust allergy. So I wasn't going to be able to work there during January or much of February. The pressure of time was converting what was going to be a gift to Seekers into a burden.

The other thing that you need to know is that I have come to have modest skill with tools rather late. My father is here today and he can tell you that as a boy and as a teenager, I could neither hammer a nail without bending it nor saw a straight line. Dad is very handy with tools, and it must have grieved him far more than he let me know to have a son so inept. However, I want to add that I have good memories of assisting my Dad during home repair projects and the conversion of the second story of our home into two bedrooms and a half bath when I was about 12. I remember him saying, "Measure twice and cut once." I also remember him teasing me by saying, "No matter how many times I cut this board it's still too short." (Think about it!)

I could carry things, measure things, and hold things. I just couldn't hammer or saw well. I think I learned a lot about work from my father during those times about tenacity, about

doing unpleasant tasks because they had to be done, about doing things the right way even if no one would see them. I learned how to deal with one's mistakes – it just has taken me longer to accept the fact that I make any!

Let me add parenthetically that I think a lot of women seriously undervalue this experience that men and boys have of doing something together rather than just being together. For a lot of us males, we don't necessarily talk about our relationship the way females do, but we enjoy being together because we're doing something together. I think that this is the value of a mission group for many men, rather than just being in a sharing group. When I hear women say that men ought to just share their feelings together, I want to say, stop trying to make us into women!

Back to making the cross and banner stand. I finally went and picked out the wood. At most hardware stores they have small bins of precut hardwoods, such as oak and maple. Since Deborah had drawn a sketch with dimensions, it was easy to pick wood of the right lengths. However, her design had two problematic aspects, and I spent several hours trying to track down an oak closet pole – they don't make them – and an oak 4x4 block before I decided to substitute 1x2 for the pole and to glue 3 small pieces of 1x4 together to simulate the block.

I got lucky and had a nice weekend to start cutting the wood. I have a circular saw and I also used a hand backsaw once or twice. Then I used my router to cut the lap joints for where the horizontal pieces cross the vertical pieces. This was the most unpleasant part because I have to have my face near the router to see the cuts accurately I inhaled a lot of sawdust. I aggravated my allergy and got my chronic sinus condition for late winter and spring, so I dreaded this part. I also used an electric drill and an electric sander. I left them unfinished because I didn't know how Deborah was going to add her copper art.

What did I think about while I was working? During cutting and routing I concentrated fiercely on the task at hand. Other times I carried a picture of what the cross and banner stand would look like when finished and how they might look in a processional. Sometimes I thought about this building and how I am both comfortable with it and but also dislike its configuration of rooms and its need for modernization. I thought sometimes about new space and particularly about 1101 Pennsylvania Ave. and its possibilities and some – to my mind – of its serious drawbacks. I thought about how the lasting legacy of the Clinton Administration might be that it has seriously overworked the career civil service. Filling nail holes and sanding were two rather mindless tasks during which my mind wandered to thoughts like these.

Sometimes I kicked myself for having promised to do this. Oak is not the easiest wood for me to work with and sometimes I cursed it. This was particularly true when I was back to bending nails again. I tried to pre-drill some places and that didn't work, so I wound up bending about 20 nails. Part of my cursing was reliving my youthful failures in working with tools.

And part of my learning was learning to let go. In some of the management training I've had recently, the phrase, "Sometimes good is enough is good enough" has been used. For a perfectionist like me, this has really come across as good news. And so there are some imperfections about these that I would change if I had to do them over. You can probably see some of them. But being willing to let them be, rather than to overly stress myself on top of the other stresses in my life, has been instructive for me. Good enough has been good enough. For me. And I think, for God.

Did the Spirit lead me in making these? I don't know. There were times when the project felt like I was carrying the cross to Calvary. I do think the Spirit always leads us to the cross. In fact, Peter's words on Pentecost focused the

multitude's attention on Jesus' death on the cross and his resurrection. Paul wrote that the cross is a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to the Greeks. Well, the cross is a stumbling block to us even now. Our culture values material success and personal achievement and negotiating compromise in political issues. The cross is about caring for others and about humility and about seeking after justice. So as we process with this cross in worship, we are claiming ourselves to be a nonviolent countercultural army.

So these are my gifts to Deborah and to Margreta and to Seekers. They are also a thank you to my father for his love and help in teaching me in ways he never knew. And in the learning process for me, they are gifts to myself as well.

by Margreta Silverstone

Today we celebrate the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the followers of Jesus. The Holy Spirit is identified as both a creative force and a giver of gifts. In the weeks since Easter, Seekers have been able to enjoy two new art pieces.

I am grateful to Seekers for encouraging me in finding a creative voice. I want to thank Kate Amoss for teaching and Juanita Jernigan for hosting a class on making a log cabin quilt where I first learned how to quilt. It seems hard to believe that that day was over 5 years ago.

Deborah already mentioned the beginnings of these efforts in a meeting to design the Seekers door sign. At that meeting I had some concept of sign with a cross and a compass, but didn't think of interpreting that concept into fabric.

About a year ago, after having shared another of my quilts with the School of Christian Living, Deborah approached me about making a banner piece for Seekers with dimensions of

about 18 inches wide and six feet long. I was non-committal, but did begin to consider if the concept of the cross and compass couldn't work in fabric. This past February, Deborah asked me if the piece could be done by Easter!

The biggest learning experience and the scariest component of creating this banner became the need to reflect the community of Seekers through this means. I was very aware of this piece being different from my other work. Trying to reflect a corporate sense of faith beyond my individual faith commitment is an added dimension, something that can be both joy and burden.

As I reflected on Seekers, the immediate text that was my source was Robert Greenleaf's Servant Leadership:

I now embrace the theory of prophecy which holds that prophetic voices of great clarity, and with a quality of insight equal to that of any age, are speaking cogently all of the time. Men and women of a stature equal to the greatest of the past are with us now, addressing the problems of the day, and pointing to a better way and to a personality better able to live fully and serenely in these times.

It is seekers, then, who make prophets, and the initiative of any one of us in searching for and responding to the voice of contemporary prophets may mark the turning point in their growth and service.

We Seekers are a people who are intentionally on the way.

When I considered the image of being "on the way" I thought of old travelers and what sources they used for guidance in finding their way. The image of the compass immediately came to mind. But a compass can only work if there is a magnetic pole to use as the center place of stability. While many of us Seekers are influenced and fed by other faith traditions, our predominate center is the life and death of Jesus. Thus the compass is set against the backdrop of the cross. The fabrics

used to make the compass are fabrics that I have dyed myself to get the subtle color changes.

While most compasses are round, I chose to do an oval compass and haven't been sure really why. It may simply be a stylistic liberty. In my meditation time these last few weeks, I cannot help but wonder if I didn't also recognize that we Seekers will need to draw on inner sources of courage to move us forward, to push us through in our journey. We may need to approach our journey like warriors, with shields in hand to protect us, and courage to lead forward against obstacles.

Another reason that the image of the compass came to mind, I think, had to do with Marjory's work in the offering plate. I see boats against waves in the central image of the offering plate. The old seafarers used compasses to guide them as well. But I also wanted to incorporate the waves in the banner. I tried to accomplish this through the fractured sky. The sky was created with big swoops of waves rotating around the compass and cross point of the cross. The sky will not always be bright for us so there are some darker fabrics to warn of storms ahead.

After completing the cross, the compass and the sky, I felt that the piece was not yet complete. I needed another image that said "Seekers". I hoped to include you, my community of faith, in this piece. The stylized plant at the foot of the cross is representational of a Swedish Ivy plant. The Swedish Ivy plant is given to the newest core member of the community upon their joining. I know that not all Seekers view belonging or membership in this way, but I believe that membership in Seekers isn't "core" membership. Membership and belonging to Seekers is about our individual choices of identifying this community as our place of belonging. For some it will take the expression of "core" membership. For others it will be in other ways. This plant has the names of the 100 people who have identified themselves as part of the Seekers community so far by signing the recommitment book, both the old black book

and the newer one. The old black book only had the names of "core" members. The newer book has, for the past few years, reflected the names of "core" members and others who identify this community as their place of belonging. There are leaves on the plant that have no names yet. I have faith that others will find their place of belonging here with us.

The plant also celebrates a connection that some of us in Seekers have with each other but rarely talk about. The leaves were created using a technique developed by Kumiko Sado, a Japanese American, who interpreted Japanese origami into fabric. There are a number of us in the community who share a connection with Japan.

On Easter Sunday, during the word for the children, I was frightened to see that the banner was moving. I think Karin and Nathaniel were looking and pulling at the leaves. After the initial shock, I could appreciate the Spirit's guidance in having the Seekers plant on the banner at the level of our children's eyes. Their interest and touching of the banner was its moment of being blessed into the community by them.

Since Deborah asked me to create a processional banner, I also wanted the person who was "processing" with it to have some focus for sight. The back has a night sky with three stars and the quilting of the compass can be seen so that the compass can still guide a person at night. There is also a label with some of this story on it. I hope that the label can help future Seekers to know a little about how this piece came to be in this community.

While this sermon time has been an explanation of these two pieces and the work of three people, I hope that we do not view these works as simply gifts to the community. It is our hope and prayer that these gifts can reflect our community and that all Seekers can share in them. May the Spirit continue to create and empower all of us. Amen.