



outStanding in the field

Wild Geese Among Us

A Spiritual Journey in the Arts

by Michelle Roemer Schoen



Greg Finch, second from right, with members of the arts committee of the Metropolitan Memorial United Methodist Church in Washington, D.C.

While a student at Princeton Seminary, Greg Finch (Class of 1997) discovered what would become his lifelong passion. It came as an epiphany one evening at Princeton's Nassau Presbyterian Church during "The Hollows of Lent," an artist series that he helped create in collaboration with the church's staff and arts committee.

Master potter Sasha Makovkin was the featured artist that evening. After sharing a meal, congregants gathered in the chapel, where they found Makovkin waiting. Without a word, he slapped a block of clay onto his potter's wheel. Children and adults stretched to see as a large bowl began to emerge from the spinning mass. As he shaped the bowl, Makovkin spoke of God as a potter and God's creation as clay. Lighting a single candle and placing it at the center of the moist clay, he invited congregants to write their cares and concerns on slips of paper and then come forward to set them ablaze in his "basin of Christ."

Finch watched a young boy place a slip of paper into the flames, watch it burn, and then retreat in silence. Without fanfare, the boy returned, twice, to peer over the edge of the basin and watch his cares go up in flames. In that moment, witnessing the child "hear God's voice" through the language of the artist, Finch heard his own call.

In the years since, Finch has shaped his epiphany into Wild Geese Among Us, a constellation of creators, strategists, artists, and theologians who help congregations encourage and equip their leaders, members, and the artists among them to become "voice givers" for the Spirit. The organization's name is borrowed from the title of Finch's thesis: "Wild Geese Among Us: Artists and the Journey of Spiritual Community," written as part of a masters in arts, arts management, and religion at Wesley Seminary and American University in Washington, D.C.

Throughout his life, Finch has been fascinated by wild geese and now uses them as a metaphor for the relationship between spiritual life and the arts. "Wild geese move with an impulse that calls them toward a distant horizon," he says. "Living out this impulse shapes their life cycle. Awakened for journey, the geese travel ancient, avian pathways en route to distant horizons. Along the way they collaborate with other flocks, using the navigational tools of sun and stars, taste, sound, touch, and smell. Much like the geese, we are on a spiritual quest. God's Spirit has breathed a call into us, which we try our whole lives to live out—the call of Christ. We share our journey with a wealth of collaborators who navigate with tools of the senses: liturgies, music, visual arts, and literature."

The only person "fixed" within his organization, Finch employs partners who function as "wild geese" collaborators on a range of projects. Theologians, physicians, art therapists, painters, dancers, poets, psychotherapists, and liturgists bring insight, resources, and skills to projects that deepen the Spirit's ability to speak. "As God's Spirit moves in every generation, artists serve as 'voice givers' for the Spirit in both priestly and prophetic roles," says Finch. "As priests they carry forward the ecclesial vocabularies of liturgy, poetry, music, architecture, dance, and visual arts that link us with our spiritual tradition. And as prophets, they create new vocabularies that communicate the Spirit to this and future generations."

Finch believes that these "voice givers" for the Spirit are woven into the fabric of every gathered community of believers and that every authentic community of God can access a network of creative people available to that community. He says his "task, and the task of all who wish to authentically voice the Spirit of God, is to search out these 'voice givers' and coax them into the creative acts that articulate God's Spirit. This work is improvisational," says Finch. "We seek collaborators who will help shape a refreshed understanding of who God is."

Wild Geese Among Us works alongside congregations and ecclesial bodies, healthcare and educational institutions, and community organizations to integrate theologically sound, sustainable, culturally accessible artistic presence and practice into their life and ministry. "Through retreats, lectures, workshops, and hands-on practical experience, we encourage emerging vocabularies for God's Spirit and the development of communities capable of sustaining them," Finch explains. "It is simultaneously an exploration, an experiment, and an adventure."

He is currently helping the Society for the Arts in Healthcare (SAH) shape their 2004 national conference scheduled for late April in Washington, D.C. He is working on a unique feature of the conference, a "pilgrimage of healing" at the National Cathedral. Sacred space, ritual, symbol, and healing liturgy from a variety of spiritual perspectives will be explored as national leaders in the fields of medicine, healing, art, and spirituality consider practical models for uniting healing, spirituality, and the arts.

Like the wild geese navigating the heavens, Finch will continue his journey of the imagination, finding communities where the "voice givers" can offer creative acts of grace. ■

For more information, visit www.wildgeeseamongus.com.