

by Heather Hueston

To Mike Gisser, assimilation means mixing with other races and losing your cultural identity. For Jewish people, says Gisser, assimilation is the biggest problem facing them, especially in the Maritimes.

Gisser, head of the Atlantic Provinces Jewish Students' Federation, says the scattered regional Jewish population means less local Jewish content and less reason for young Jewish people to stay there.

"Of about 20 high school graduates last year, only three stayed. The rest went to places like McGill or Western, which has the second largest Jewish student population in Canada," says Gisser, who calls the situation a tragedy. "Dal even had its own Jewish fraternity," he says.

Marvin Pritzker, rabbi of Beth Israel Orthodox synagogue, agrees that it seems like fewer young Jews are staying in the region.

"I get my computer print-outs from Dal, and while they're never completely accurate, what numbers there are are getting less over the past dozen years," says Pritzker. A renewed interest in studying in a Jewish social environment may be a factor, as well as the low regional birth rate.

The Jewish Students' Federation has 250 students on its mailing list, 95 of whom are in Halifax. Gisser says 70 per cent of these are out-of-province students, many of them grad students.

### Surviving in a white-bread culture

## Keeping the faith and the people

A 1981 census listed 2010 Jews in Nova Scotia, 845 in New Brunswick, 220 in Newfoundland and 80 in Prince Edward Island. A glance at the Jewish Atlantic phone directory shows 15 listings for the whole of Yarmouth County.

Even though Halifax has approximately 700 households (about half the Jewish population of Atlantic Canada), the Halifax Jews still have to work at maintaining their identity.

"It's easier and it's harder," says Rabbi Pritzker. Supermarkets now provide kosher products so Jews can observe food rituals and no longer have to import ritually slaughtered meat, as one man

had to, from St. John's to his home in Digby. By the time the meat arrived, it was usually spoiled, and the "crazy Jew", as his neighbours called him, ended by throwing most of it out. To outsiders, food customs seem minor, says Pritzker, but keeping kosher is an important part of the faith.

Gisser puts the responsibility squarely on the individual for keeping Judaism alive and well in the region.

"There are people who aren't proud of being a Jew. You have to work at it. You can't get anything quick from Judaism. It takes at least twenty years of studying and learning," says Gisser.

Gisser's personal concern is with cults, which draw 40 per cent of their members in North America from the Jewish population.

Less sinister than cults and much more common is the issue of assimilation by intermarriage. Rabbi Pritzker says it stems from a small marriage market ("obviously you can't marry your sister") and results in Jews leaving the area. Some return, but there is some "bleeding out".

According to Dr. Sheva Medjuck, author of *Jews in Atlantic Canada*, "Intermarriage is problematic," especially in second and third generations of the spouse

doesn't convert. However, this is offset by the number of Jews who work hard to keep their identity.

"Jewish people in the region have a strong attachment to what's here and participate in what's available," whether that means maintaining the synagogue, supporting Israel, or participating in the summer camps and programs run by the Atlantic Jewish Council (AJC).

Gisser says intermarriage weakens the Jews' bond, or covenant with God, by sapping traditional values.

"I've seen people trying to keep Christmas and Chanukah, or Easter and Passover — you can't do it," he says. Gisser calls assimilation "the first battle Jews have had within their religion. Jews can handle anything outside their religion, but we might've taken too much of a beating from the Holocaust to deal with this. I don't know."

He says he often thinks Jews should make *aliyah*, move to Israel, where the population is also struggling to maintain itself.

Medjuck remains more optimistic of the community's ability to survive assimilation. "Without mitigating the problem, I think our parents and grandparents were saying the same thing [in their day]."

Much of religion today seems split along political lines. The resurgence of fundamentalism, which may be showing cracks, at least with Christians — focusses on personal holiness and righteousness. People and society will be healed when everyone follows God's law — but which God? Then there are the social justice movements and ecumenicalism which try to work their faith while respecting those who are different from them.

We seem to have the same split in our issue this week, general issues are on the centre spread and campus groups' submissions follow (all campus groups were contacted).

The following article is an excerpt from a more detailed discussion of women in ministry entitled *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy*.

There are many issues facing women in ministry. After fighting traditional stereotypes and attitudes to become ordained, one might think that the struggles would be left behind. Too often, however, this is not the case. Female ministers continue to face difficult daily challenges which prompt questions about personal identity, self-worth, and power or effectiveness in the pulpit. Two such challenges are presented through sexual harassment and the pervasiveness of sexism.

The Canadian Human Rights Commission defines sexual harassment as "unwelcome verbal or physical behaviour related to sexuality". In response to the question, "Have you ever been the victim of sexual harassment as a theological student or in any job as a woman in professional ministry?" thirty-five per cent of the 238 women who responded

answered yes. Forty per cent of ordained, thirty per cent of lay supply/staff associate and twenty-five per cent of diaconal women reported that they had been sexually harassed while in ministry or theological training.

Sexual harassment always occurs in a setting where there is a power differential. The harasser is in a position to have some control over the employment or success of his victim and the implication is that her failure to accept the harassment gracefully may result in her dismissal, rejection, or lack of success in her field of endeavour.

Sexual harassment is one expression of an attitude of sexism, which may be defined as "the unequal distribution of personal and institutional power between men and women, where men are in control". Sexism is any belief, behaviour, or institution which discriminates against a person or persons on the basis of gender. Unfortunately, the Church is just as guilty of sexism as the rest of society in ignoring and denying

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only true church, and these two propositions conflicted. Therefore, I concluded, all must be false. It may not have been rigorously logical, but since the religions I knew had no answer to my dilemma, it gave me the impetus to wonder if perhaps there might be no god at all.

I had been devout, and merely considering the possibility that no god existed frightened me: It took me about three years to reach the point where I could say I believed in no god and not feel I would be struck by lightning. I am still not sure I believe it; a religious upbringing can be a terrible thing, can inflict astonishing fears on a child's malleable mind.

I do not doubt that religion can be good. To some, religion brings great peace of mind, helps them endure what otherwise would crush them.

But the only thing that has brought me true peace of mind is the realization that some abstract god was not going to help me, that I had to help myself because in the end, I was all I truly had to count on. This belief — perhaps it is "humanism",

though I give it no name — has helped me immeasurably more than any religion ever did or could.

If I were to believe in a god, it would be unlike any god any religion has ever offered me. It would ask of its followers not fear, but love. (How I hated the adjective 'god-fearing'! For me, fear and love were always antithetical.) It would not dangle salvation over the heads of its followers as some do, to be snatched away if rules are not followed, 'sins' are committed. It would require service, not the smug complacency of the many right-wing religions of today. In short, it would be an all-embracing god of love, and perhaps I could love it too.

That god, that religion may exist, but I no longer need a god. I was told as a child that anyone unfortunate enough not to believe in god had a gap, an emptiness that only god could fill. I

now know that to be untrue. I have discovered I can love and serve and trust without a god who may or may not exist to offer these things up to.

It is not that Christianity has asked me to have faith in something not provably true, such as the existence of a god. Like Lewis Carroll's white king, I can believe six impossible things before breakfast. It is that Christianity asked me to believe things — that most of my friends must go to hell because they were not Christians, that I must go to hell because I am gay — that go against everything a compassionate person must surely feel.

So, I realized I could not believe in a god. I do not feel I have lost anything, but rather have gained much. Perhaps I have failed Christianity. Perhaps it has failed me. But it is a failure for the better.

by Robert Matthews

I am not a Christian, although I have been one. For a time I was very devout, going to church and, I thought, really believing. But in the end, I could not believe in Santa Claus. I have tried to be a Christian, and I have failed. Or perhaps it is Christianity that has failed me.

Some religions — a great many, in fact — have told me there is no place for me in god's works, that I am doomed to go to hell. This is what drove me from religion in the first place. It became impossible to believe in hell, because every religion I had encountered believed only its members were going to heaven; the Baptists told me the Catholics were going to hell, and so on. Clearly if only one religion had the true god and all the others were false and were dooming their members to hell, I had no chance of finding the correct one, because there would never be the certainty that the one I had chosen was it. If there were not one true church, then either all religions were true or all were false. All could not be true, since some taught that they were the

women's 'self-affirmation and self-determination as moral and social agents'.

Sexism in the Church can be seen in the assumption that women will perform the same types of tasks in the Church that they do in the home: the care and education of children and the organizing and service of church social affairs. Furthermore, women must wrestle daily with Scripture, which presents a totally patriarchal world view and an image of God which is largely masculine. We speak of God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost; Our Father who Art in Heaven; the King of Kings; and the Lord. We begin to think of God as literally masculine — a powerful, dominating force who could not possibly be represented by a woman! The incarnation of God as male is taken very

seriously as proof that there is something more divine about the masculine than about the feminine.

The predominant use of male imagery and exclusive language for God are examples of sexism that have become so widely accepted that women who challenge the language are thought to be challenging the truth of the word of God.

Similar examples include the reluctance and apprehension of local congregations to call an ordained woman to be their minister; not taking a woman seriously and not trusting her to fulfill the requirements of a job; questioning a woman's authority on church matters; and the undue emphasis by interview boards on the effects of family life by career choices made by women. These boards do not

seem to realize that family responsibilities are to be shared equally by men and women. Similarly, these boards have the tendency to conduct more personal interviews with women than men, asking questions about such things as pre-menstrual syndrome, menopause, or possible pregnancy. Another valid example of sexism in the church is the assumption that, upon calling an ordained man to a charge, he will have a wife with him who will provide for his needs at home and can, therefore, dedicate more time to his pastoral responsibilities. Women, however, as in most paid jobs, do not have this assumed support and a result usually work a "double day". It would appear, then, that women in the Church are subject to the same sexual exploitation and oppression as are

women in all other areas of society. This is indeed a depressing thought, when most people look to the Church for guidance and leadership toward a new and better world in which everyone can live equally.

The Church, at various times, has provided this leadership and guidance toward equality. One can look to the life and teachings of Jesus Christ to recognize that women occupy an important and valuable role in the Christian community. The story of the friendship of Jesus with Martha and Mary of Bethany (John 11:5-27) is just one of many examples which illustrate the strength and confidence which Jesus felt with women. Indeed, Jesus, in his relationships with women, exemplified a loving, warm, compassionate acceptance of women as equals.

## The church and gays

### I do not believe

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She sees Jews here as "bicultural" — very well integrated into the larger community but also knowing what it means to be a Jew. Although they don't have the Jewish daycare, or a Hebrew school five days a week, or as many services or as "insulating" a community as Jews in Montreal so they're able to shut out the barrage of Christian experience like the two-month Christmas blitz, Jews in smaller communities have a richer experience.

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## faith for peace

by Ellen Reynolds

"Nicaragua is being brought to its knees," says Betty Peterson, who recently returned from 2½ weeks' stay in the war-ravaged country.

Sponsored by Witness for Peace Canada, Peterson was the only Quaker in the delegation of Canadian Church representatives.

A non-profit organization, Witness for Peace sends volunteers to areas in Nicaragua recently attacked by "Contras". The volunteers are there as spiritual witnesses to record testimonies of the victims of atrocities; to accompany Nicaraguans who feel more secure in a war zone with a North American by their side; and to participate in various development projects. While there, 70-year-old Peterson helped with a project digging air-raid trenches in a resettlement area called Los Pradares, approximately 60 miles north of Managua.

Her Quaker faith is one of action, identifying somewhat with Native traditions and placing a large emphasis on peace, development, and the environment as well as spirituality.

Before leaving Canada, all the volunteers participated in a non-violence training course and then a briefing session upon arrival in Managua.

Peterson returned to Halifax the day after the Sandinistas were accused of invading Honduras with a "gripping feeling of urgency about Nicaragua. There is urgency and despair but still lots of hope. The Sandinistas are not going to let this (Contra war) succeed if they can avoid it," says Peterson.

Part of the Witness for Peace program includes returning to Canada to bring their findings to the attention of other Canadians and to pressure our government for support of the Sandinistas and the recent peace talks.

Peterson found the visit profoundly moving but says she also felt some guilt walking away from the situation in Nicaragua when so many cannot. She is currently composing a spiritual article about her visit to Nicaragua for a Quaker publication.

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