

God moves in: Doing justice, loving mercy, making peace

by [Stephen Paul Bouman](#) in the [December 4, 2002](#) issue

*“And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”* (John 1:14)

Incarnation. God con carne. God in the flesh. Jesus. For Christians, the meaning of the dance of life comes to this: Jesus of Nazareth, Mary and Joseph’s son, is Immanuel, God with us. The poet T. S. Eliot has spoken of incarnation as “the still turning point, the intersection of time and timelessness.”

At Stony Point Conference Center 35 miles north of New York City, Christian, Muslim and Jewish lay and clergy who served as chaplains at the Ground Zero morgues are gathered for a retreat sponsored by Lutheran Disaster Response in partnership with the Red Cross. They are groping for mutual support and meaning, seeking a language to express the inexpressible. The world around them has “moved on,” at least in terms of public utterance and attention. Here in New York, “moving on” has been more difficult, and we have been feeling out of sync with the world. Yet here too voices are saying it is time to “move on,” to heal. No one desires this more than the 15 lay and clergy chaplains gathered in the room.

They begin to go around the circle introducing themselves. The first person speaks of how he has longed for this time of reflection on the experience. And then his voice breaks as he speaks about the broken flesh, the body parts, and of how he is haunted by his memories. The chaplains are not “moving on,” and healing is a long way off.

But they are “moving in” toward incarnation. There is a shared sense in the room that there is something holy about the human, something spiritual about flesh, something horrific about the interrupted dance of a human life. Not moving on, but moving in to shared expressions of lamentation, human solidarity, communal listening. Ever since the word took flesh, ever since God became Jesus, there is no body part, no human life that does not register in the heart of God.

At Kennedy Airport my son and his wife emerge from the terminal, approach the car and place a tiny bundle in my arms. John Paul. My grandson. His wrinkled face

squinces in the space between sleeping and waking. His arms fly up in the air and tremble. He is the little conductor of my universe. As he settles into my embrace he emits grunts and a squeal. He opens his eyes. Is what I am feeling now what Mary pondered in her heart?

Incarnation is the still turning point of the ministry of Christ's church. It means we never "move on" from the dance of human life. It means we are ever moving more deeply into this battered yet holy humanity in which Jesus was pleased to dwell. It means moving in to humanity at its most vulnerable.

Consider those who continue to suffer from the economic effects of the September 11 tragedy. Project LIFE (Lutheran Initiative For Empowerment) is a parish-based case management program designed to help survivors of the September attacks maneuver through the red tape and get access to public assistance. About 70 percent of those served by Project Life are immigrants. About one-third of those are undocumented. Many are hungry, without employment, homeless or in danger of losing their homes. There are hundreds on the waiting list. They all carry the flesh Jesus was pleased to inhabit. His mother sang about them in the Magnificat: "He has lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things." Incarnation means not "moving on" past the poor, the stranger among us, but moving in toward those in whom our incarnate Lord waits: "When I was hungry . . ."

When God took a body the angels sang about glory to God and peace on the earth. It was promised that the Incarnate One would be a "prince of peace." He called those who followed him to "move on" from the broken bodies of war, and to "move in" toward the reconciliation that is dearest to God's heart. "Blessed are the peacemakers." Incarnation means that a body is God's body, whether it is buried at Ground Zero or buried in the rubble of a bomb in Afghanistan; whether it is broken by a suicide bomber in a Tel Aviv bus or riddled by an Israeli gunship in Ramallah; whether it is ravaged by AIDS in Africa or dying in a nursing home in Long Island.

God did not move on from the folly and suffering of a fallen creation. God moved in—not just on any body but on Jesus of Nazareth, whose broken body was lifted up on the cross and lifted out of the tomb. God moved in on each of our bodies when they were joined with water and word at baptism. God moves in on this creation by taking another body, the church, the body of Christ, as God's incarnation in the world.

A chaplain cries. John Paul stirs in my arms, shudders and goes back to sleep. And the church moves into the world doing justice, loving mercy, making peace and pointing to the Incarnate One.