

6-2009

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Recommended Citation

Andreasen, Demetra, "A Community of Faith" (2009). *Lake Union Herald*. 475.
<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/luh-pubs/475>

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A Community of Faith

BY DEMETRA ANDREASEN

The summer had been particularly full. I was fortunate to enjoy an extended visit to my homeland of Greece and to accompany my husband to four different countries while he fulfilled university and church obligations. Many times we found ourselves rushing down long airport corridors, navigating bustling pedestrian thoroughfares and speeding along over-crowded motorways. As much as we enjoyed our adventures abroad, we were particularly grateful at summer's end to return to Berrien Springs and its relative peace, safety and security. We were soon to discover, however, that sometimes home can be a hazardous place.

While doing some "catch-up gardening" in our yard one Friday afternoon I misstepped, precipitating an awkward fall. I knew I was in trouble when I couldn't get up without assistance. I was taken to the hospital and soon learned my diagnosis: a fractured pelvis. The pain was excruciating and debilitating, and the healing and rehabilitation would prove to be slow and challenging. Over time, however, I would also learn that difficult circumstances can usher in a shower of blessings, especially when one belongs to a community of faith.

While I was in hospital and later at home convalescing, I had much time to experience these showers of blessings and to reflect upon them. A few friends organized a team of 30 women from my church and a visitation roster for them to follow. During the

next few weeks, one by one the women showed up at my door. They visited with me and helped with chores. Many brought gifts of food, plants, reading, listening and viewing materials. I saw God in the faces of these sisters from my community of faith. I was overwhelmed by their kindness, care and encouragement. "Dear God," I often exclaimed with tears in my eyes, "I do not deserve this shower of blessings. It is too much!"

I couldn't help but wonder how differently the events would have played out if my accident had happened at my home in Greece rather than at my home in Michigan. In Greece, my two sisters and other relatives occasionally attend a church of another faith. There they light a candle, kiss an icon, listen to the liturgy and the priest's short sermon,



and then return home. Unless they meet a friend by chance, they have no interaction with the congregation or the priests, and they don't expect to. Contact with the church officers is typically confined to arranging a confession, a baptism or a funeral.

One day while in Greece last summer, I happened to pass by an outdoor celebration for the opening of a neighborhood health clinic. The mayor of the town, various dignitaries and many citizens were in attendance. The priests and cantors chanted some Byzantine hymns and offered blessings for the success of the new building. As I stood and listened, my mind was flooded with images of healing recorded in Scripture: the parable of the Good Samaritan; Jesus healing the Syrophenesian woman; Jairus' daughter being restored to life. All of these people in the Bible stories received blessings by being in the company of Jesus. The audience I joined in Greece that day could also have received a message of hope and healing, but there was no community of faith to convey it to them.

Judging from the experience of my relatives and friends, when people in Greece face pain and suffering, an accident, a death or a catastrophe such as the wildfires of last summer, the church or a community of faith is not where they expect to find comfort, hope or nurturing. Family members and neighbors typically step in and offer assistance, but the concept of a family that is created and bound by faith is largely unknown.

A childhood friend in Greece has recently experienced a devastating series of tragedies. One of her sons fell from a ladder and became a paraplegic. Several years later she herself was diagnosed with colon

cancer. She has not been visited by her priest, perhaps because she does not attend services regularly. No church members have visited her either. She has not received anything that we might consider spiritual counseling or encouragement, or even an opportunity to express her frustrations and doubts. She has no one with whom to share the inevitable questions that arise during times of crisis: *Does God care about what is happening to me?* or *Why isn't God answering my prayers?* How different it could be for her, I often think, if she were a part of a community of faith.

While communities of faith offer many blessings, they do at times present their own specific challenges. Working, worshiping and socializing with our church members week after week, month after month and year after year isn't always easy. People can get to know too much of each other's business. Criticism, unwarranted curiosity and intolerance can be the byproducts. You would expect that because our church encourages Bible study, prayer and the imitation of the life of Christ, that our transformation to His likeness would prevent these problems from surfacing. But we all know that at times each of us and each of our neighbors fall prey to the common flaws of humanity. Perfection is too much to expect even for believers. But the inevitable shortcomings of one or all need not detract from the very real blessings that are ours when we belong to a community of faith.

Demetra Andreassen was the Community Relations coordinator at Andrews University for ten years. She remains very active in the community and is a member of many civic organizations. Demetra also co-founded the Women's Scholarship Committee at Andrews University. She is the proud grandmother of two.