



by Pat Hershberger

I believe my whole life has been influenced by Mennonite women's gatherings. As a very young child, I was with my mother as she attended Sewing Circle once a month and another monthly gathering named Sisters Fellowship. These were good times with my friends, and I somehow also knew the value of such times for my mother.

After marriage, I arrived at another Mennonite congregation and am invited by an "older" woman to come to the Women's Mission and Service Auxiliary. I did, and I also participated in the projects of canning and freezing food for local Mennonite institutions. These were times of labor and fellowship — valuable for belonging to this congregation.

In my years of WMSA, Women's Missionary and Service Committee and now MW USA, I have gained a great benefit for my spiritual life with other women. In the mid-1970s, a larger vision and emphasis for women's gatherings began to grow within the across the Mennonite Church. In our conference, Pacific Coast Conference, this vision included women's retreats, which had been happening in many places with much success.

This new emphasis on retreats included a retreat format that included an extended time of silence. I remember my first silent retreat. It was June 1979, and it had been organized by our conference WMSC vice-president, Pauline King, and congregational vice-president, Goldie Heyerly, for outgoing and incoming officers of WMSC. How refreshing and challenging. How deeply meaningful. It was an early summer day that lent its own charm and comfort to a retreat, and it was a quiet place away from other schedules and activities. All of this was so inviting to quiet reflection and prayer. Twenty-four hours of silence with others: how strange to share a meal together in silence with readings from scripture and devotional writers!

That retreat awakened within me a desire to deepen my own relationship with God and to do that in the company of a loved friend. We now share a friendship, formed in that

retreat and in our meeting weekly for some months to share our journals, our new discoveries and pray for each other.

I am indebted to the vision and willingness of Mennonite women leaders in many places. Their vision impacted my life, and I pray that for all the women in our congregations.

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