

Midwest Pilgrims: We're Still Here

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MIDWEST PILGRIMS IS THE RESULT of a charge given the women at the Nauvoo women's retreat held in 1982. It was to go back to their various geographical locations and organize similar gatherings. It is also the product of the cultural and political climate of the time, in and out of the church. The women's movement, the advent of *Exponent II*, and the publication of books like *Mormon Sisters* and *Sister Saints* all provided rich soil to nourish the growing awareness of our rich heritage as Mormon women—women who were accomplished, spiritually gifted, and recognized equals in the early annals of the church. This also provoked questions about women's equality in the modern church—questions which reached a fever pitch in our Midwest area because of the ERA and the church's involvement with its defeat. There were wounds, some deep, and there were feelings of dis-ease for many women in the church community. Midwest Pilgrims seemed to arrive at just the right time to throw a lifeline to many of these women.

The first Midwest Pilgrims retreat held in St. Charles, Illinois, in the spring of 1983 was a miracle. The most repeated sentiment about that gathering was that it was the beginning of the discovery of a real sisterhood, something that had been lacking in many home wards. And it seemed a safe place to voice fears, frustrations, to both question and to build testimony. Doreen Taylor said this about that first retreat, "We followed the path with the light of the moon covered by clouds of a recent fresh shower and the dim glow of a flashlight. Kay Carpenter said that if the Celestial Kingdom is like this weekend, she wanted to go. Suddenly from out of the shadows jumped two figures yelling 'BOO!'" That kind of captures the essence of our retreats—celestial moments punctuated by a good goose.

Midwest Pilgrims is perhaps different from some of the other women's retreats in that we move from place to place. We meet every

other year at a beautiful Catholic retreat center in Rockford, Illinois, and the other years might find us in Minnesota, Michigan, Ohio, Indiana or Wisconsin. This gives everyone opportunities to plan a retreat, makes traveling a bit more equitable, and brings in new blood from the host area. Some years we've held two retreats—one spring, one fall, but busy lives have generally moved us back to one per year.

We don't follow any set formula or schedule; that is left to the group in charge. Some years we invite a featured speaker, other times we fill the schedule with small discussion groups and presentations led from among our own ranks. Friday night is usually a time for introductions—we've seen many clever and revealing methods to break the ice—group song writing, sharing loaves of bread that symbolize something in our lives, questions we'd like answered, bumper stickers that summarize us, etc.

If there is any "given," it is the music—usually led by the inimitable Cathy Stokes, who tries to be patient with our mostly white-folks way of singing. Some pilgrims come every year just to sing with Cathy. We've also started a choir for anyone who wants to join. They practice on Saturday afternoon and perform on Sunday morning. It's often non-traditional and always beautiful. The other piece of the agenda that is sacrosanct is the Quaker Meeting, held on Sunday morning and outside, weather permitting. This is a time for summarizing, for healing, for sharing thoughts and hearts.

Sometimes, but not always, we've shared the sacrament (when men of the priesthood are in close proximity), sometimes we have skits, musical performances, writers' workshops. Sometimes women come who don't like the retreat and leave. Sometimes we have women who never come back. Sometimes we have women who move from the Midwest and always come back. Sometimes we leave filled; sometimes, not so much.

We just marked our 20th year. In this impermanent and transient society, this seems remarkable. Why and how have we managed such a long run? The "how" has to do with some very practical management principles. We have been able to be financially sustaining by charging \$5 dues to remain on the mailing list. This is very loosely enforced; mostly we rely on an honor system of support, but it provides seed money for each year's retreat. There have also been generous "angels" who have donated money to cover unforeseen costs and to provide "scholarships" for those who might not have been able to attend for financial reasons. Even though we are geographically spread out, we've maintained a *de facto* "central office" in the Chicago area so that there has been a rooted Midwesterner to field questions and be sure that the wheels are turning toward the next year.

The “why” is a bit more complex and may have already been addressed. It could be as simple as the fact that women like to be together. And we need more than forty minutes on Sunday to get a good discussion going. Especially when those discussions have been led by the likes of Val Avery, Judy Dushku, Cheiko Okazaki, Louise Degn, Lavina Fielding Anderson, or Peggy Stack, to name but a few. And when those discussions can take place in the Kirtland Temple or the room above the Joseph Smith store in Nauvoo or along the banks of the Mississippi River, who wouldn’t want to be a part of that?

The first groups were diverse—old and young, working and stay-at-homes, committed Mormons and not-so-committed. The demographics have fluctuated over the years, and there began to be some concern that the group was becoming decidedly “gray.” Would there be a younger generation devoted enough to pick up the baton? Some of those fears were assuaged at our 20th gathering. Susan Rugh asked us some questions to help provide an historical perspective to those years. “What were your issues 20 years ago?” she asked. “What are your issues today?” One of the groups reported that 20 years ago some of them had been wrestling with the ERA while others were wondering where’s Waldo? The issues had ranged very widely. Surely there would be a range of pressing issues to keep us going for another 20 years.

Have we made a difference? Are retreats little more than weekend getaways? As I read over post-retreat remembrances, I hear the hopeful voices of women who aren’t necessarily trying to change the world or the world of the church, but are trying very hard to find ways to live lives that are thoughtful and meaningful and grace-full. Midwest Pilgrims has provided sanctuary for women at various crisis points in their lives, has given rest to the battle-fatigued, has stimulated our thinking and given us some really good laughs. That’s certainly worth something. Claudia Bushman wrote that the purpose of *Exponent II* was to be faithful but frank. I believe the same has been true of our Pilgrimages. In the first issue of *MS* magazine, Gloria Steinem said in an article on sisterhood, “I have met brave women who are exploring the outer edge of human possibility, with no history to guide them, and with a courage to make themselves vulnerable that I find moving beyond words.” I think Midwest Pilgrims are those women, and we now have twenty years of meaningful history. I too find that moving beyond words.