

## Perspective

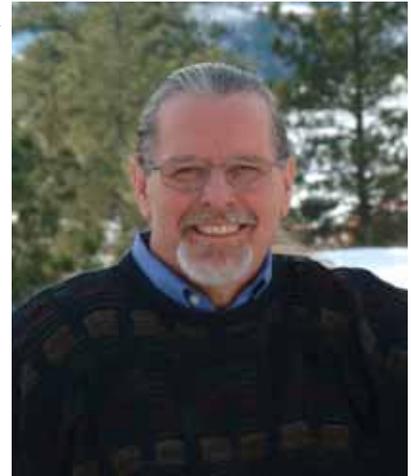
Vol. 16 No. 1

### GROWING EDGES

February 2006

A funny thing happened to me on the way to writing this article on suffering. (Not funny in the sense of humorous; more in the sense of a comedy of errors.) It began with surgery on my foot to correct some old injuries (fully intended and planned for) . . . which led to an infection in the foot (not intended at all) . . . which led to taking antibiotics to fight the infection (not intended but a good thing) . . . which led to a serious allergic reaction to the antibiotics (most definitely not intended) . . . which led to an overnight stay in the Intensive Care Unit at a nearby hospital (certainly not intended but most instructive).

While much of what happened these past days was not intended by me, it afforded an excellent opportunity to deepen in the knowledge that “all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28). I also expanded my understanding of the insight of James into the ways trials produce in us a patient endurance (Jam. 1:2-4).



### Suffering Avoidance

In the future we are going to look back on 2005 as “The Year of Suffering.” The most identifying features of that year were the Asian tsunami, the hurricanes on the Gulf Coast, and the earthquake in Pakistan. These natural disasters brought death to multiplied tens-of-thousands and have displaced many more.

These terrible natural disasters remind us that suffering is painfully real. Now, this knowledge is important to us today for we live in a culture of “suffering avoidance.” To be hit in the gut by suffering on a massive scale shocks us back into reality, and that reality is that suffering is a *fact* of human existence as we know it. We had better get used to it. We live in a good world gone bad. Even the creation which is so beautiful in so many ways has been affected by the Fall and that is how we experience it.

These all but overwhelming natural disasters are comprised of multiplied millions of stories of individual suffering. And it is the individual human suffering that we must see and understand and refuse to run from.

We speak in Christian theology of the vicarious suffering of Christ. By this we mean more than Christ’s sacrifice on Calvary, though we do mean to include this pivotal event. On the cross Jesus, the Christ, took into himself all the sins and sorrows of the past, present, and future, and through his blood redeemed it all. Jesus experienced, however, not only a cross-death but also a cross-life. As the Son of God walked among us in the flesh he constantly and consistently identified with those who suffer; the bruised and the broken, the poor and the weak, the hopeless and helpless.

### Standing With . . . Aching With . . . Weeping With . . .

This is where you and I come in. We are never more the Church than in our identification with those who suffer. This is one vital way we participate in the vicarious suffering of Christ (Phil. 3:10). This is why mission hospitals have always been such an important element in mission penetration throughout history. Learning to stand with, ache with, weep with those who suffer may not be everything, but it certainly stands close to the center of our apprenticeship to Jesus. And it is right here that the watching world will be able to see our love. It is love in action, love with skin on it. Here we need to be sharply counter-cultural. Rather than avoid suffering at all costs we intentionally embrace suffering to the glory of God and the good of all people.

I urge you: don't run from suffering. It is here. It is real. If you have not experienced it personally as yet, believe me, you will. And, frankly, it is all around you—at home, at work, among neighbors and friends.

### ***Two Challenges for Avoiding Suffering Avoidance***

So now, here is the first challenge I would like to place before us: find someone who is suffering within your circle of nearness. Our spiritual formation is first always local and specific. So, find a suffering human being. This will come to you as a result of prayerful watchfulness to those in your world. Neighbors. Friends. Even strangers. Then simply **be** with this person and allow what happens to happen. You will be led I am sure.

This is where we begin, but it is not where we end. Our circle of nearness needs to be expanded. So here is my second challenge: intentionally step outside of your circle of nearness. Experience a short term mission trip. Visit Auschwitz. Read *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*. Take a plunge experience into the urban life in one of our large cities.

Undertaking this second challenge will expand your circle of nearness and will guide you to the next step. I cannot describe that next step for you because it will be individual and specific to your own experience and gift set. You will be led I am sure. Then, mind the Light.

Peace and joy,



Richard J. Foster

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## **GROWING TOGETHER**

We begin this section on *praxis* with three reflection exercises.

1. Begin with a reflection on the reasons our culture is so committed to suffering avoidance. How does this avoidance evidence itself? What factors come into play to push us in this direction? Are there ways you find yourself participating in suffering avoidance?
2. Now, enter a time of reflection on suffering by reading the book of Job. In *The Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible* we write about this: “Job, in reaction to his own suffering, demonstrates that there simply is no easy relationship between good fortune and righteousness or between misfortune and wrath. He finds that life is a mystery that can be faced only by trust in and reliance upon God. And this mystery eludes the easy answers of his companions and even his own best explanations. It defies Job’s reason and shatters the boundaries of his understanding—as it does our own. In the end, suffering challenges us to trust in a God, who, in ways beyond our knowing, controls the ultimate destinies of humans and nations” (p. 718).
3. As suffering is such a chaos-inducing experience, the lessons of suffering resist easy categorization. We quickly learn that suffering will challenge our deepest convictions and strongest beliefs. Our quest to reconcile suffering with the love of God can lead to despair . . . or to a deeper knowledge of the love of God. Consider: Are there ways suffering can teach us patience and endurance? Can it lead us to trust in God so as to avoid despair? Can it help us see that God’s reality is beyond the scope of our individual wishes and desires?
4. Okay, with these three reflections in hand begin working on the two challenges I outlined in the cover article: find someone in need near you and then increase your circle of nearness so that genuine compassion can flow out to an ever-expanding number of people. Remember, focusing on specific exercises like these are meant to help us develop a habit of engagement with the real world and to defeat the habit of suffering avoidance. William Penn wrote, “True godliness does not turn men out of the world, but enables them to live better in it and excites their endeavors to mend it.”

—Richard J. Foster

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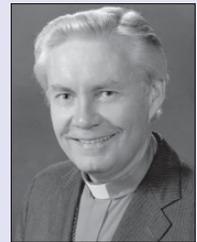
God's work in our lives can be painful, but his ultimate goal is to transform us into something better. Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what he is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on. You knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised (C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 205).



James Bryan Smith

### **INTERVIEW WITH JAMES BRYAN SMITH AND WILLIAM VASWIG**

In the rebuilding of their lives, *RENOVARÉ* team members James Bryan Smith and William Vaswig describe their respective experiences of suffering, physical helplessness, grief, disappointment, loneliness, and waywardness. We asked both of them about suffering, and their responses reflect the experience of grief and hurt that many of us have felt and continue to feel over the loss of those close to us.



William Vaswig

**Perspective: In following our Christian responsibility of being “light” to the world, how did you share your faith during this difficult time?**

**James Bryan Smith:** Within a short span of time I lost one of my closest friends, Rich Mullins, our daughter Madeline (2 yrs. old), and my mother. During those times I never thought about being a “light” unto anyone. I was just trying to manage, to keep believing that God is good, and that in the end all will be well. I don’t think we should even try to be ... anything other than what we are. If we are living in the kingdom of God our lives will naturally look different. Many people said to my wife and I later on that our faith was an inspiration to them. That was nice to hear, but frankly, we were not trying to be an inspiration. We were just living in the kingdom, and in the kingdom we grieve differently, we grieve with hope. And that usually provides all the light a darkened world needs.

**William Vaswig:** A psychiatrist friend of mine told me to talk about my wife Marcine to anyone who would listen after she died. I did, and it helped the grieving process. I lectured to a group of pastors and talked with individuals about the dying process. Witnessing through it was automatic in a way.

**P: Reacting to faith is characterized by focusing on the Lord. How were you able to keep focused?**

**JBS:** In times of trial everything that supports you gets tested, and much of it does not make it through the crucible of suffering. Most of these are beliefs, such as “life will go on like this forever.” We assume that our loved ones will never get sick, and that our world will be perfect. Then it all shatters with a phone call, or in the hospital room or the funeral home. In times like these everything crumbles—except one: “I will never leave you or forsake you,” Jesus said. I never tried to focus on Jesus because Jesus was all I had.

**WV:** The reality of his presence increased immensely when I knew Marcine was only in the other room (heaven). I still reach out to her physically sometimes when I wake up at night, forgetting that she is gone.

**P: Following your suffering, did you feel energized in your Christian walk with the Lord?**

**JBS:** Not at all. I was simply rebuilding my faith, because much of it had been torn down. Many of my core narratives (stories about reality that we have adopted through the years) were shaken and shattered. The kingdom core narrative is this: “the sufferings of this present age are preparing us for an eternal weight of glory” (2 Cor. 4:16-18). I was not energized following my time of suffering, but I did emerge from it with a stronger, more real faith.

**WV:** Not very. I grieved very much for five years. It has been eight years now and I have accepted it. The whole thing “decked” me. I almost quit praying for people. It de-energized me.

**P: What are the benefits that come from suffering that will not come in any other way?**

**JBS:** When things go well in our lives we are seldom reflective about life and its meaning. Also, we rarely lean on God in times of success. When we suffer, as I said before, all of our props fall down, and we are forced to ask what life is really all about, and to trust in God in the midst of the darkness.

**WV:** Both my heart surgeries, stents, heart attacks, stroke, and carotid-arteries caused me to lose confidence in myself and put much more confidence in God. That’s what happened to Paul, which he speaks of in 2 Cor. 1:8-10, and that helped me get on my feet.

**P: Can spiritual growth take place through suffering?**

**JBS:** Absolutely. James 1 and Romans 5 tell us that suffering produces a whole host of virtues: patience, perseverance, hope, etc. But it is crucial that we be living in the kingdom of God and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

**WV:** It is one of the best ways to learn to walk with the Lord that there is. It is hard but it brings with it spiritual maturity if one sees it all in his light. "Suffering produces endurance"—1 Pet. 4:1-2. There is a strange word here which some of us dare to face. "Whoever has suffered in the flesh has finished with sin." Suffering can enable us to live less and less according to human desire, and more and more according to God's will.

**P: Can non-Christians profit from suffering?**

**JBS:** I have known several non-Christians who have gone through serious sufferings such as the death of a child. When you take the kingdom of God out of the equation, it makes suffering very different. There is no real reason for hope. Most of the non-believers I know simply have to divert their attention because to think about their loss is too painful. So they garden or throw themselves into their work. Their suffering never gets redeemed, just ignored. But that being said, suffering forces all of us to figure out what life is about, and quite often that will lead us back to things like loving one another, enjoying the moments of life, helping out people in need. Christian or not, suffering shatters the illusion that happiness comes from outward things (money, fame, physical beauty, etc.) and forces us to look to something deeper.

**WV:** By all means. Many millions of people have come to know God through suffering.

**P: Can unnecessary types of suffering be profitable?**

**JBS:** One of the things we do in times of suffering is to search for the meaning. When our daughter died a lot of people tried to offer comfort by saying, "God certainly must have had a plan in all of this." And if you look hard you can see some meaning. She only lived two years, but 500 people came to her funeral, and several doctors and nurses came, and told us about how her life had impacted theirs. I am grateful for that. But I can also honestly say, "Hey, God, this was unnecessary! She could have been born healthy and done even more good." We search for meaning because of our innate sense of justice. But I have come to believe that the only justice is heaven. There is not justice in this life. But heaven is the greater restorer of justice. My daughter never got a chance to dance and sing in this life, but she is dancing and singing in heaven. I can complain about only having her for two years, but she will reign eternally in heaven. I am guessing she and I will have 100,000 years or so together.

**WV:** I doubt whether suffering for a Christian is ever unprofitable. God, of course, does not cause suffering most of the time. It is part of our fallenness. But he does allow suffering to take place. It seems to me that life for each of us as God's children is a three-act play, so to speak, which God has written for us. It is his plan for our lives. But he gives us freedom to choose not to follow his plan exactly, and in order to accommodate our waywardness he rewrites the play. When we are in Act I he is rewriting Act II, and so on. As a result it will come out where he wants, even though we go our own way half (or even most) of the time. He is so gracious to use all our suffering, whether it is willful on our part or not, to arrive at the place he chooses. Our very last breath in this life can be a willful rejection of him, but he will try his best to end it in a good way.

—Marian Euler

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**Solitude and the  
Way of the Heart**  
Mark 1:35-37

**Featuring**



Richard J. Foster • Roy Searle  
Gayle-Anne Drury • Jeff and Jill Sutherland  
& The RENOVARE Ministry Team

I am pleased Roy, Gayle-Anne, Jeff, and Jill will be with us, for sharing from their Celtic Christian perspective and for helping us better understand the blessings and challenges for RENOVARE in the substantially secularized Great Britain and Ireland context. Please join us.

– Richard J. Foster

**For More Information**

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A Selection by Nicholas Wolterstorff from  
*LAMENT FOR A SON*

I walked into a store. The ordinariness of what I saw repelled me: people putting onions into baskets, squeezing melons, hoisting gallons of milk, clerks ringing up sales. “How are you today?” “Have a good day now.” How could everybody be going about their ordinary business when these were no longer ordinary times? I went to my office and along the way saw the secretaries all at their desks and the students all in their seats and the teachers all at their podiums. Do you not know that he slipped and fell and that we sealed him in a box and covered it with dirt and that he can’t get out?

I tried to jog and could not. It was too life-affirming. I rode along with friends to go swimming and found myself paralyzed. I tried music. But why is this music all so affirmative? Has it always been like that? Perhaps then a requiem, that glorious *German Requiem* of Brahms. I have to turn it off. There’s too little brokenness in it. Is there no music that speaks of our terrible brokenness? That’s not what I mean. I mean: Is there no music that *fits* our brokenness? The music that speaks *about* our brokenness is not itself broken. Is there no broken music?

There are those who plunge immediately back into work. I honor them. But I could not do it. And even if I could, I would not. Plunging back at once into the ordinary and the life-affirming could not be my way of honoring my son. It could not be my way of remembering him. It could not be my way of living with faith and authenticity in his absence.

I skimmed some books on grief. They offered ways of not looking death and pain in the face, ways of turning away from death out there to one’s own inner “grief process” and then, on that, laying the heavy hand of rationality. I will not have it so. I will not look away. I will indeed remind myself that there’s more to life than pain. I will accept joy. But I will not look away from Eric dead. Its demonic awfulness I will not ignore. I owe that—to him and to God.

Imagination and thought are out of phase. Sometimes it’s as if he’s not dead, just away. I see him. Then thought intervenes and says, “Remember, he’s dead now.” For twenty-five years I have been imagining what he’s doing. That keeps on going. In me now there is this strange flux of spontaneously picturing him and then painfully reminding myself.

And not just picturing; also hearing. For weeks his boxes of books and clothes stood in the entry. I could not bear to move them. Finally, I began carrying them off to the garage. While carrying the fifth box or so I heard his cheerful voice, loud and clear, calling from the entry, “Hey Dad, I’m back.”

His hair will always be red in my pictures of him. Only the living age.

I have been daily grateful for the friend who remarked that grief isolates. He did not mean only that I, grieving, am isolated from you, happy. He meant also that *shared* grief isolates the sharers from each other. Though united in that we are grieving, we grieve differently. As each death has its own character, so too each grief over a death has its own character—its own inscape. The dynamics of each person’s sorrow must be allowed to work themselves out without judgment. I may find it strange that you should be tearful today but dry-eyed yesterday when my tears were yesterday. But my sorrow is not your sorrow.

There’s something more: I must struggle so hard to regain life that I cannot reach out to you. Nor you to me. The one not grieving must touch us both. It’s when people are happy that they say, “Let’s get together.”

What is it that makes the death of a child so indescribably painful? I buried my father and that was hard. But nothing at all like this. One expects to bury one’s parents; one doesn’t expect—not in our day and age—to bury one’s children. The burial of one’s child is a wrenching alteration of expectations.

But it’s more than that. I feel the more but cannot speak it. A child comes into the world weak and vulnerable. From the first minutes of life, we protect it. It comes into the world without means of sustenance. Immediately we the parents give it of our own. It begins to display feelings and thoughts and choices of its own. We celebrate those and out of our own way of being-in-the-world try to shape and direct and guide them. We give of ourselves to the formation of this other, from helplessness to independence, trying our best to match our mode of giving to the maturing of the child—our giving maturing with the child’s maturing. We take it on ourselves to stay with this helpless infant all the way so that it has a future, a future in which we can delight in its delight and sorrow in its sorrow. Our plans and hopes and fears are plans and hopes and fears for it. Along the way we experience the delights and disappointments of watching that future take shape, from babblings to oratory, from floundering to climbing, from dependence to equality.

And now he’s gone. That future which I embraced to myself has been destroyed. He slipped out of my arms. For twenty-five years I guarded and sustained and encouraged him with these hands of mine, helping him to grow and become a man of his own. Then he slipped out and was smashed (pp. 52-58). (Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, © 1987 Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI. Used by permission; all rights reserved.)



Nicholas Wolterstorff is the Noah Porter Professor of Philosophical Theology at Yale Divinity School, New Haven, Connecticut. Among his other books are *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*, *Art in Action*, and *Until Justice and Peace*

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## GOING DEEPER

Below are resources on the topic of suffering. We hope one might speak uniquely to your condition.

### ***Lament for a Son* by Nicholas Wolterstorff**

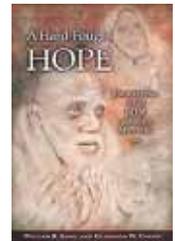


While philosopher Wolterstorff has authored many books contributing significant scholarship in several subjects, in *Lament for a Son* he writes as a loving father grieving the loss of his son. Brief vignettes present a moving honesty and intensity, all the facets of his experience of this irreversible loss. Though he grieves “not as one who has no hope,” he finds no comfort in the pious-sounding phrases that would diminish the malevolence of death. Every narrative account of events—from the numbing telephone call on a sunny Sunday afternoon that tells of 25-year-old Eric’s death in a mountain-climbing accident, to a graveside visit a year later—serves as an occasion for remembering, for meditating, for struggling to accept and understand. Profoundly affirming, *Lament for a Son* gives eloquent expression to a grief that is at once unique and universal—a grief for an individual, irreplaceable person. William B. Eerdmans, softcover, 111 pages.

***Lament for a Son* . . . . . \$ 10.00 each**

### ***A Hard-Fought Hope: Journeying with Job Through Mystery* by William R. Long and Glandion W. Carney**

Have you felt such despair that Job, by comparison, seems to have gotten off easy? When trials and griefs threaten to smother you in their wake you may flirt with abandoning your belief in a good and just God. Later, you may feel guilty but still bitter and unresolved about what’s happened. The story of Job gives permission to shout “UNFAIR” to the heavens. Here Long and Carney do not offer platitudes; they plumb the mysteries of pain and loss honestly. Like Job, they recognize that suffering can prompt a depth of soul strong enough to rebuild hope and bring us closer to God. Upper Room Books, softcover, 160 pages.



***A Hard-Fought Hope* . . . . . \$ 13.00 each**

### ***Divine Providence and Human Suffering* edited by James Walsh and P. G. Walsh**

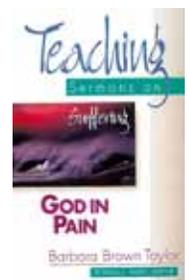


50+ readings from Athanasius, Basil, Origen, and others from the early centuries of the Church. Themes addressed include “Providence and Evil,” “Suffering and Christian Growth,” “Vicarious Suffering: Jesus the Suffering Servant,” and “Death, the Gateway to Life.” Each reading includes a short introduction. “It would be a fair summary of the patristic teaching on divine providence and human suffering to say that none of the ancient Christian writers ever experienced more than a passing difficulty in accepting the two concepts as perfectly compatible with one another,” begins the Introduction. Liturgical Press, softcover, 272 pages.

***Divine Providence and Human Suffering* . . . . . \$ 8.99 each**

### ***God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering* by Barbara Brown Taylor**

Everyone understands human pain. But many Christians have difficulty comprehending God’s pain, especially God’s pain in the death of Christ. Is it atonement or child abuse? To speak of God in pain, says Barbara Brown Taylor, is not only to address the biblical stories of Christ’s suffering and death, but also to proclaim the God who is present in our pain. This volume of teaching sermons on suffering presents different approaches to the problem of God in pain. In each sermon, Taylor speaks with sensitivity and profound insight as she addresses pain and both its human and divine impact. Abingdon Press, softcover, 138 pages.



***God in Pain* . . . . . \$ 13.00 each**



## GOING PLACES WITH RENOVARÉ

VISIT [WWW.RENOVARE.ORG](http://WWW.RENOVARE.ORG) FOR MOST UP-TO-DATE SCHEDULE

<b>Date</b>	<b>Event</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Staff</b>	<b>Contact &amp; Info</b>
17-18 February 2006	Washington State Regional Conference	Mountain View Ch. of Nazarene 940 Israel Rd. Southwest Tumwater, Washington	Richard Foster Marti Ensign George Skramstad	Doris Burke <a href="http://www.renovarenorthwest.org">www.renovarenorthwest.org</a> 360-357-3235
18 February 2006	Northfield Minnesota Local Conference	St. Olaf College 1520 St. Olaf Avenue Northfield, Minnesota	Emilie Griffin	Jennifer Anderson Koenig <a href="mailto:koenig@stolaf.edu">koenig@stolaf.edu</a> 603-664-5809
3-4 March 2006	Gahanna, Ohio Regional Conference	Shepherd Church of the Nazarene 425 S. Hamilton Rd. Gahanna, Ohio	Richard Foster Marti Ensign George Skramstad	Greg Rosser <a href="mailto:grosser@shepnaz.org">grosser@shepnaz.org</a> 614-471-3368
24-25 March 2006	Winchester, Virginia Regional Conference	Braddock Street UM Church 115 Wolfe Street Winchester, Virginia	Richard Foster Emilie Griffin George Skramstad	Cynthia Zirlott <a href="mailto:formationbsumc@adelphia.net">formationbsumc@adelphia.net</a> 540-667-3366
16-20 July 2006	RENOVARÉ Covenant Retreat "Solitude and The Way of the Heart"	YMCA of the Rockies Snow Mountain Ranch Winter Park, Colorado	Richard Foster Gayle-Anne Drury Roy Searle Jeff & Jill Sutheran	Norma Kelley <a href="mailto:norma@renovare.org">norma@renovare.org</a> 303-792-0152
20-27 September 2006 <i>This conference is primarily for speakers of Korean.</i>	RENOVARÉ Korea Leaders' Retreat	Glacier Presbytery Camp Lakeside, Montana	Brian Kang Joshua Choon Min Kang Daniel Dong Won Lee Eugene Peterson	Brian Kang 714-529-9190 <a href="mailto:kang@renovare.org">kang@renovare.org</a>
22-23 September 2006	Austin, Texas Regional Conference	Site To Be Announced	Richard Foster Emilie Griffin George Skramstad	Larry Linenschmidt <a href="http://www.hillcountryinstitute.org">www.hillcountryinstitute.org</a>
6-7 October 2006	Charleston, West Virginia Regional Conference	Site To Be Announced	Richard Foster Juanita Rasmus George Skramstad	Lee Williams <a href="mailto:leewilliams@intelos.net">leewilliams@intelos.net</a> 304-583-6066
2-3 February 2007	Regional Conference	<b><u>Dates Available</u></b>	Richard Foster George Skramstad RENOVARÉ Team Member	Norma Kelley <a href="mailto:norma@renovare.org">norma@renovare.org</a> 303-792-0152
16-17 February 2007	Regional Conference	<b><u>Dates Available</u></b>	Richard Foster George Skramstad RENOVARÉ Team Member	Norma Kelley <a href="mailto:norma@renovare.org">norma@renovare.org</a> 303-792-0152
2-3 March 2007	St. Augustine, Florida Regional Conference	Anastasia Baptist Church St. Augustine, Florida	Richard Foster John Ortberg George Skramstad	Anastasia Baptist Church 904-471-2166
23-24 March 2007	Regional Conference	<b><u>Dates Available</u></b>	Richard Foster George Skramstad RENOVARÉ Team Member	Norma Kelley <a href="mailto:norma@renovare.org">norma@renovare.org</a> 303-792-0152
27-28 April 2007	Roseville, California Regional Conference	Valley Springs Church Roseville, California	Richard Foster George Skramstad RENOVARÉ Team Member	Norma Kelley <a href="mailto:norma@renovare.org">norma@renovare.org</a> 303-792-0152

***For information or to help organize one of the above conferences, please call or e-mail the contact person.***