

WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING . . .



Schuermann builds the reader's affections for the Bradbury characters in such a way that you should not be surprised to find yourself including some of these blessed souls into your own daily prayers, only to remember, embarrassingly, that these are not real souls at all. And yet, they are very real. The widows, the mother hens, the lonely singles, the gossips, the meddlers, the jilted—they are all around us. The names and faces are different, but the sins and the robe of righteousness that cover us all are the same.

—**Rebecca Mayes, housewife and blogger**

Katie Schuermann gets it! . . . not only what goes on behind the scenes—and the masks—in a congregation, not only how to negotiate the treacherous genre of Christian fiction, which is so often syrupy or contrived or idealistic, but, much more important: how Christ transforms real life in a still fallen—and frequently funny!—world.

—**Dr. Carl C. Fickenscher II, Concordia Theological Seminary**

There are a myriad of delightful qualities about this book: its humor, its bold witness to Christ, its gentle reminder of how deadly our pet sins are. One of its most endearing qualities—beyond masterful turns of phrases, twisty plot developments, and characters you are certain you have met in real life—is that it is true.

—**Adriane Heins, executive editor, *The Lutheran Witness***

A Lutheran Jan Karon? Yes, Katie Schuermann! Both are great wordsmiths crafting engrossing small town tales. Both focus on town and congregational life. Both have great character development and are enlightening, spiritual fun reads. . . . For your reading delight, for sharing, and for gifting!

—**Rod Zwonitzer, Director of Broadcast Services/KFUO,
Host of *BookTalk***

Anyone who has said of small town life, “You can’t make this stuff up” has been proven wrong by Katie Schuermann. If the people of Lake Wobegone were to fall in love with a book, it would be *House of Living Stones*, where the odors are strong, the pastor is good-looking, and the writing is all above average.

—**Rebekah Curtis, housewife, author, editor, and avid reader.**

A delightful homage, complete with colorful characters who break the eighth commandment like pros, a heroine both sinner and saint, and a portrait of small-town life that reads like a caricature but is all too real. Katie’s writing elevates “ordinary” life to the extraordinary, alternating whimsical hilarity with poignant real-life-under-the-cross moments that will have you laughing, crying, and wanting more.

—**Gretchen Roberts, digital marketer, pastor’s wife, avid reader of fiction, and *Anne of Green Gables* fan**

How refreshing it is to read for pleasure and then find it to be also wonderfully edifying time spent. This is Mitford plus . . . where Schuermann brings the reader into the joys and some serious challenges of a small town. You will love the writing, the story line, the characters, and the humor. Sit down with some Chamomile or Merlot . . . read and enjoy!”

—**Richard C. Resch, Kantor and Professor Emeritus, Concordia Theological Seminary**

Katie Schuermann’s venture into fiction breathes a breath of fresh central Illinois air as her pen travels along a road less traveled. . . . Her tale of life and love, meddling and music, rebellion and reconciliation in the fictional college town of Bradbury, Illinois, is entertaining and insightful. . . . This is a delightful diversion and a helpful and practical account of living that I can’t help but recommend.

—**Rev. Mark A. Miller, president, Central Illinois District LCMS**

A charming story about life in a small congregation in rural Illinois, with the rare feature of a choir director as a main character. The view-from-the-pew (or choir loft) perspective is reminiscent of Mark Schweizer’s Liturgical Mysteries series, and the down-home Lutheranism of Garrison Keillor’s Lake Wobegon. Schuermann’s tale is sure to draw knowing nods and smiles from readers.

—**Kevin Hildebrand, Kantor, Concordia Theological Seminary and St. Paul’s Lutheran Church & School**

House OF Living Stones

KATIE
SCHUERMANN

CONCORDIA PUBLISHING HOUSE • SAINT LOUIS

*For my Michael,
who never fails to laugh in all of the right places.*



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*We are God's house of living stones,
Built for His own habitation.
He through baptismal grace us owns
Heirs of His wondrous salvation.
Were we but two His name to tell,
Yet He would deign with us to dwell
With all His grace and His favor.
(LSB 645:3)*

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CHAPTER ONE:

MRS. SCHEINBERG IS INCONVENIENCED



Mrs. Arlene Compton Scheinberg positioned herself advantageously behind the cherrywood desk in the front office of Zion Lutheran Church. The sign out front on the church lawn announced to all the world that the Reverend Michael G. Fletcher was Zion's divinely called shepherd, but every sheep in the flock knew that Mrs. Scheinberg was the self-appointed herd dog; and she did not care for the looks of the two wolves in wrinkled suits sitting expressionless on the chairs along her east wall.

The man on the left with salt-and-pepper hair wore a blue suit coat but no tie. Mrs. Scheinberg scrutinized the exposed top button of the man's shirt over her gold-rimmed glasses while simultaneously editing the bulletin for the upcoming Sunday service. *A man should finish dressing before leaving the house*, she grumpily thought.

The young man on the right appeared to be growing a beard for the first time. The blond hair on his chin, however, was growing much faster than the hair on his red cheeks, leaving him looking oddly like a rooted sweet potato. "A job half done is

a job undone,” she quipped under her breath. She picked up her red pen and made a large, annoyed check on the bottom of page 2. Pastor Fletcher would expect the bulletin to be finished for printing by four o’clock that very afternoon, and Mrs. Scheinberg was not about to let these two sojourners distract her from her service to the Lord—not, at least, while so many other generous women in the congregation waited in line to steal her blessing.

Just last year, Miss Geraldine Turner, after catching a misplaced appositive in the bulletin announcements two Sundays in a row, made a point of suggesting to Pastor Fletcher that perhaps Mrs. Scheinberg would appreciate some help proofreading the bulletin every Thursday afternoon, between three and four o’clock to be precise.

“As the English Teacher Emeritus of Bradbury High School,” Miss Turner had quipped in that tight, queenly way of hers, “I would be most happy to be of service.”

Mrs. Scheinberg had kindly reminded Pastor Fletcher that the trustees had thought to provide only one chair behind the front office desk, and unless he could spare his own chair between three and four every Thursday afternoon, the benevolent Miss Turner would have no place to sit.

Miss Turner hadn’t been her only critic. This past December, Mrs. Thomas Edison Bradbury III had dropped by the church office one Monday morning to express her sorrow and regret at the misspelling of her husband’s ailing mother’s maiden name in the prayer requests. She had even provided her own marked copy of the bulletin for Pastor Fletcher to keep, and she meaningfully handed Mrs. Scheinberg a copy of the Bradbury County Home Extension Office’s recent publication, *The Life and Times of Bradbury: A Complete History*.

“Oh, no, I insist you keep it for free,” Candice Bradbury had fluttered, her counterfeit smile pushing sideways against her ample cheeks. “You will find it to be a useful resource in the future. The *correct* spelling of every name of every one of my husband’s relatives is in there. I know. I edited the book myself.”

Mrs. Scheinberg had made sure to tie a festive, red-and-gold ribbon around Candice’s miserable book before giving it to Pastor Fletcher as a Christmas present.

Even the sweet widow of the deceased Pastor Gardner had offered her proofreading services just last month. “Arlene, dear,” Alice had crooned, “I couldn’t help but notice the heading in last Sunday’s bulletin about the fundraiser for the food pantry on Washington Street.”

Mrs. Scheinberg had not bothered to look up from the magazine she was perusing. “I double-checked the date and time, Alice. It’s correct.”

“Well, dear,” Alice stumbled, “it’s not the date and time to which I’m referring.”

Mrs. Scheinberg wondered why a faithful servant of the church could not be allowed even one moment’s peace in which to properly view the new line of sport coats featured in the JCPenney summer catalog. She sighed from her hips, put her glasses on top of her head, and gave Alice an eyeful of feigned civility.

“You see,” Alice blushed, holding out the bulletin in question, “it says, ‘Come and support our tasty food *pantry*.’”

Mrs. Scheinberg hadn’t missed the masculine chuckle—quickly stifled and masked as a cough—that escaped from behind the door of Pastor Fletcher’s study. Even now, she scowled at the memory, her ears taking on the shade of her new, melon-colored blouse. “Everyone’s a critic,” she muttered aloud, causing the two dark suits to look up expectantly from their

perches against the wall. She glared at them over her glasses, daring them to breathe, before slowly returning her attention to her bulletin.

The front door to the office opened just then, letting in a gust of warm air that smelled of sunned boxwood and potting soil. A young woman with rosy cheeks and serious, brown eyes floated in on the breeze. She wore a gray pencil skirt, white blouse, and quarter-length pink sweater. Her dark-blond locks were cut short and stylishly curled around her forehead and cheeks. The two suits turned curious gazes toward the newcomer, and Mrs. Scheinberg felt oddly grateful to the young woman for the distraction. Uncharacteristic feelings of goodwill and hospitality for the ingénue stirred in the older woman.

“May I help you?” Mrs. Scheinberg smiled generously, though a bit unnaturally. She was out of practice.

“Yes, my name is Emily Duke. I have an appointment with Reverend Fletcher, though I think I may be a bit early.”

“Won’t you have a seat?” Mrs. Scheinberg gestured to the empty chair sandwiched between Neiman and Marcus. The young woman hesitated, scanning the room for an alternative that imposed a little less intimacy upon three total strangers. Mrs. Scheinberg followed her gaze to the rickety, three-step footstool near the floor-to-ceiling bookcase and the brass plant stand supporting an overgrown asparagus fern in the corner. Evidently finding nothing more suitable, Emily Duke lowered herself carefully onto the seat that had been proffered and hugged her elbows to her ribs in an obvious effort to keep from touching the two men.

Mrs. Scheinberg creaked back comfortably in her executive leather chair and resumed her editing, though not before taking note of the fact that the young woman now seated in the waiting room appeared refreshingly modest and pressed for a woman of

her generation. She even sat with her ankles crossed. And wore hose. *Naked knees are for young children and harlots*, Mrs. Scheinberg thought with satisfaction. As far as she was concerned, Emily Duke's honor and reputation were forever secured right then and there by a simple pair of nylons.

The door to the left of her desk opened, and out stepped a man in a clerical collar. He had an ordinary face and an unassuming manner, but his dark eyes were bright with intelligence and looked as if they could crinkle into a smile at any moment, a characteristic that endeared him to everyone in his flock but the church secretary. "Mrs. Scheinberg," Pastor Fletcher said, "would you please invite Mr. Norton into my office?"

As faithful and as nice as Pastor Fletcher might be, Mrs. Scheinberg couldn't bring herself to forgive him for being under forty. It was not his fault, to be sure, but it was a fault all the same. She took off her glasses and rubbed the bridge of her nose, careful not to leave the comfort of her own chair. "Mr. Norton," she called across the room, "the Reverend Fletcher is ready to meet with you."

Pastor Fletcher's mouth twitched and his dark eyes twinkled, a sight that irritated Mrs. Scheinberg to no end. How she wished these young pastors' mothers had taught their sons to smile a little less and to comb their hair a little more! A lesson or two in ironing would have been in order as well. Why, in thirty years of faithful service, she had never once seen Pastor Gardner, may he rest in peace, step out of his home without a starched clerical on his back and a blazing white part in his hair, but this Michael Fletcher barely remembered to cut his mop of curly hair, let alone tame it; and by the end of the day, the wrinkles in his clerical wiggled and squiggled across his back like a sloppy community garden whose rows had been hoed by a five-year-old. What were the seminaries teaching these men anyway?

For the next forty-five minutes, Mrs. Scheinberg wrangled with the third page of the bulletin while simultaneously listening to the muted interviews behind Pastor's closed door, first with the unbuttoned Mr. Norton and then with the half-bearded Mr. Simmons. (She found it satisfying to discover that Mr. Simmons's voice was higher-pitched than her own. She had guessed as much.) Then, there was also the matter of Emily Duke, who was patiently waiting for her turn. As hard as Mrs. Scheinberg tried, she could not help sneaking glances at her. The young woman had a curious yet charming tendency to sway her head back and forth ever so slightly as if listening to music that no one else could hear, and she pursed her lips and furrowed her brow like a little girl who had lost herself in her thoughts. She could not have been a day over thirty, but even from across the room, Mrs. Scheinberg saw that there were faint lines etched around her eyes and mouth as if they were lingering shadows of laughter and smiles from years past. Disarmed by Emily Duke's mannerisms, she caught herself staring at the young woman.

Each in his turn, Mr. Norton and Mr. Simmons exited Pastor's study and, subsequently, the office door. Mrs. Scheinberg celebrated the return of peace to her pasture with a desk picnic of four peanut butter cookies and one canning jar of iced peach tea. She brushed the incriminating cookie crumbs off the front of her blouse just as Pastor Fletcher ambled out of his study on his long legs. "How is the bulletin coming?" His tone was friendly, and his hands were in his pockets. Put off by his casual manner, Mrs. Scheinberg sniffed and made a large, visible check on the third page. "It would go a lot faster if there were not so many people requiring my attention and skill this morning. You *know* Thursdays are my busy days."

"Duly noted, Mrs. Scheinberg." Pastor Fletcher turned to smile warmly at the young woman. "You must be Dr. Duke."

“*Doctor*” Duke? Mrs. Scheinberg thought with approval, though she was suitably rankled to be hearing of the young woman’s title for the first time. For some reason known only to Pastor Fletcher, she had not been privy to the résumés of the candidates ahead of the interviews. And that was another thing about these young pastors. They locked their filing cabinets every evening. Pastor Gardner never would have done such an untrusting thing.

“Yes,” the young woman said, her smile lines blossoming in full glory. She stood and shook the reverend’s hand and then walked before him into his office at his gestured invitation.

Pastor Fletcher lingered for a moment next to the secretary’s desk. “Mrs. Scheinberg, would you please include a congratulatory note in the bulletin this week for Pastor Douglas? He retires a week from this Sunday.”

“But he is not a member of this congregation.”

“His grandchildren are.”

She made a show of exchanging her red editing pen for the green writing pen in the top drawer of her desk and then looked over her glasses at the clergyman. “It seems to me that the proper place for an announcement regarding Pastor Douglas’s retirement would be in his own church’s bulletin. Would you like me to go ahead and call the other churches in the county to see if they have anything they would like to add?”

Pastor Fletcher, eyes sparkling, appeared as if he was resisting the urge to plant a patronizing kiss on the top of her gray head, but, apparently, even youth has its wisdom. He simply stepped into his study.

“And what exactly am I supposed to say in this congratulatory announcement?” she called loudly into the great wide void.

“How about, ‘We wish Reverend Douglas many blessings in his retirement,’ ” was the faceless reply.

The Choir Immortal

KATIE
SCHUERMANN

CONCORDIA PUBLISHING HOUSE • SAINT LOUIS

*For my dad, Bob Roley, who raised me to
believe I could do anything, even write a book.*



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Excerpt: *House of Living Stones*

CHAPTER ONE: THE BIG DAY

Zion Lutheran Church roasted in the late August sunshine like a crock in a convection oven. Ripples of hot, humid air rose from the asphalt parking lot in waves, and Beverly Davis, dressed in her favorite cobalt-blue frock with the embroidered portrait collar, heaved her sticky frame out of her Buick and onto the sweltering pavement. She fanned herself frantically, shaking out her pleated skirt in a desperate attempt to create wind where there was none, but her efforts were to no avail. Beads of sweat sprouted on her powdered forehead and threatened to stream down her temples in erosive rills as she crossed the black, oily expanse and entered the church office door. Irv, her husband and Zion's faithful trustee, was waiting for her there.

"Here," Bev panted, shoving a metal tool into his hand while dabbing at her face with a clean hankie. "I found it in the shed like you said. It was hiding under those bags of fertilizer we bought on sale last week at Big R."

Irv simply nodded his thanks before quickly disappearing down the hall with his adjustable wrench. The stoic man had never been one to waste words, and the present crisis called for

all brevity and efficiency. In less than one hour, Zion was hosting Bradbury's wedding of the century, and the church's air conditioning was a bust.

It was an ecclesiastical comedy of errors, really. Irv had been urging the congregation for years to replace the five rusting air-conditioning units currently baking on a concrete slab outside the fellowship hall, but his advice went unheeded. As Don Kull had put it at last March's voters' meeting, "I don't see no good reason to fix what ain't broke."

Irv had shrugged at the time, mumbling something like "They're on their ninth life, that's all," but he didn't push the matter any further. He wasn't much for speaking in public, let alone arguing.

Some of the voters in attendance, however, rarely turned down an opportunity to speak.

Candice Bradbury stood before the gathered assembly like Eris on Mount Olympus condescending to address the lowly humans below. "If there's a concern about longevity, we should protect our investment by working the units less. I move we run the air only on Sundays, when the majority of the congregation is present, and let the church staff enjoy the residual air the rest of the week."

Mrs. Arlene Scheinberg, Zion's crusty secretary of thirty-seven years and exactly one-half of the church staff who would be enjoying the proposed weekly leftovers, proceeded to turn the office thermostat down an extra three degrees every Monday through Friday for the entire month of June—in commemoration of Candice's thoughtful benevolence, of course.

The situation worsened when two of the units began leaking refrigerant in early July.

“Seems ta me we could jus’ patch ’em up with some duct tape,” Don Kull suggested to his fellow members on the Board of Trustees.

“The copper tubing’s damaged,” Irv explained. “Needs to be soldered or replaced.”

“Well, then,” Harold Schmidt sighed, doing his best to appear put out by the notion, “I guess we’d better get to it.” Secretly, the retired appliance salesman was beyond pleased. He had a high-temperature torch sitting in his garage, waiting for an opportunity such as this.

Pastor Fletcher quickly intervened, both for Irv’s sake as well as for that of the seventy-three-year-old stained glass windows rising above the fellowship hall. “How about we hire a technician for this job?”

Harold grunted and Don shrugged, but Irv gave his pastor a grateful nod.

When a fan on one of the units gave out exactly two weeks before the wedding, heat began to rise among the ladies in the quilting circle.

“I’m telling you, it’s only a matter of time,” Mrs. Scheinberg ruminated aloud to the other quilters one Tuesday morning in August. “Those units need replacing.”

“I simply don’t agree, Arlene,” Candice quipped, setting down her needle to adjust the amethyst brooch pinned to her lavender top. She fingered it reverently as if it were a medal of honor and not her latest purchase from *lia sophia*. “Four of the units are still working perfectly fine.”

“Candice makes a good point,” said Nettie Schmidt, Harold’s sweet-natured but rather dim-witted bride of fifty-two years, nodding from her corner of the quilt. “It’s like that time I bought a turkey breast at full price at IGA when I already had

cube steak thawing in the fridge. Harold nearly got sick from eating both for supper.”

“Why didn’t you just—?” Bev began to ask, but Mrs. Scheinberg laid a silencing hand on Bev’s arm and shook her head. The church secretary had learned years ago not to follow the piper—however tempting his tune—through the meandering maze of Nettie’s mind. That’s how people got lost.

Candice, on the other hand, hummed an affirmative as if Nettie’s carnivorous comparison had made perfect sense. “All I’m saying is that it’s offensive. We shouldn’t be spending money on something so opulent as replacing working air-conditioning units when there are children starving in Africa.”

Mrs. Scheinberg snorted. “So says the woman flashing costume jewelry while sitting comfortably in seventy-two degrees Fahrenheit.” She lifted her wattled chin, ruffled her feathers, and clucked at the purple peacock splaying her colors across the quilt. “Wait until it feels as hot as Africa in here, and then we’ll see who thinks good stewardship is opulent and offensive.”

Mrs. Scheinberg, it turned out, had not been too far off from the truth in her prediction that morning with the quilters, for it really did feel like the Congo in the church the afternoon of the wedding. Bev patted at her face, nervous that all of her foundation would be wiped clean away before the ceremony even started. Not that it mattered. It was the bride everyone would be looking at—and oh, what a sweet bride! How she had blushed a pretty pink when the women of the congregation had offered to throw her a wedding reception.

“Now, please, don’t go to any trouble,” she had pleaded. “All I want is a simple ceremony.”

Simple, however, was not a word the women of Zion understood. Marge Johnson proceeded to make exquisite invitations

by hand, using pressed, dried flowers from her own garden; Phyllis Bingley worked all of June and July quilting individual coasters for wedding favors; the Koelster sisters promised biscuits from scratch and fried chicken for the meal; and Candice, not to be outdone, baked and frosted fourteen fluffy, white twinkie cakes for the dessert.

Even Yvonne Roe, Zion's disapproving misanthrope, descended from her castle to offer to sew the bridal gown.

"What color should I make it? She's not exactly a virgin, you know."

Bev had colored five different shades of red at Yvonne's brash assertion, but Mrs. Scheinberg simply poured a look of hot contempt over her gold-rimmed glasses onto the wrinkled, priggish woman.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Yvonne. She's a widow, not a whore. It's not her fault her husband up and died on her." Mrs. Scheinberg knew about such things. Her own husband had up and died nearly forty-one years before in a farming accident.

"The dress will be white." This final directive came from Rebecca Jones, a pretty, spirited mother of five, counting the one currently growing in her womb. She also happened to be the matron of honor for the wedding. "We already picked out the dress last weekend in Fairview Heights. So, thank you, Yvonne, but no thanks."

"Well, call me when your own dress needs letting out." Yvonne eyed Rebecca's expanding abdomen meaningfully. "I can't stand the way women flaunt their pregnancies in tight clothes these days. It's indecent."

Rebecca, who stood to be a full eight months pregnant the day of the wedding, fought against hormones, human nature, and the powers of hell to offer the sour woman even one civilized word, but charity turned out to be too tall an order for the

moment. The expectant mother simply bit her lip and turned, red-faced, away.

In the beginning, Bev had felt left out of the wedding planning festivities. She had no special skills to offer the creative team, and Sunday after Sunday, everyone chattered and exchanged ideas around her as if she weren't there. But when three of the five air-conditioning units blew out the morning of the wedding, it was Bev who sprang into action. She knew her way around a pressure cooker, after all: keep the steam regulating properly and watch the clock. She cheerfully corralled the bridal party safely across the street to the parsonage to keep cool, fresh, and dry while Irv performed mechanical surgery on the busted units. Then, braving the heat, she returned to the stuffy church to look in on things while everyone else was away. She busied herself with centerpieces and mints and napkins in the fellowship hall, touching up an arrangement here and patting down a tablecloth there, fussing over every little detail like the good Lutheran girl she was. She wanted everything to be just perfect. Zion was her church, after all. She had been baptized, confirmed, and married here, and, as she was not one to leave any project unfinished, she fully intended to be buried here. If this wedding didn't come off as a complete success, she would feel personally responsible.

Having fetched Irv his trusted wrench, there was now nothing left for Bev to do but wait and pray for cool air to once again rush through those eerily silent vents. It was so blasted hot! She dabbed at her face one last time before tucking her soiled hankie into her purse and walking resolutely over to the cherrywood desk sitting in the middle of the front office. She switched on the tiny oscillating fan clipped to its edge. Normally, she would never dare lay a finger on anything sitting within five yards of Arlene Scheinberg's sacred surface—the crotchety wom-

an could be touchy about such things—but the heat was making fast work of Bev’s carefully painted visage. One more minute in this stagnant air and what little remained of her makeup would slide down her face in a pink-and-blue avalanche. She threw all caution to the electric-powered wind and leaned her face into the delicious breeze.

“That’s more like it,” Bev breathed. She tossed a daring, side-long glance toward the darkened hallway through which her husband had disappeared. Not a single soul was in sight, so she lifted the edge of her skirt over the fan to dry out her intimates.

“Beverly Davis, what on earth are you doing?”

Bev jumped at the sound of the familiar voice, her hem catching on the plastic casing of the fan and ripping its precarious grip right off the desk. The fan crashed, still oscillating, onto the floor, and Bev bent over as quickly as her one hundred ninety-five pounds would allow to power off the contraption and secure it back onto the desk’s edge. She patted the silenced fan meekly before turning around to face her accuser.

There, frowning like an orangutan in a lemon sherbet-colored muumuu, stood Mrs. Scheinberg, one husky hip propped against the outside door while the other supported a box of folded bulletins.

Bev cleared her throat apologetically. “I-I was just trying to keep fresh.”

“By flashing my stapler?” Mrs. Scheinberg waddled on into the office, letting the outside door close behind her.

“The air conditioning’s down.”

“Of course it is. Those units needed replacing five years ago.” Mrs. Scheinberg sighed contemptuously and dropped the heavy box onto the seat of her mid-back leather chair. She then bent over to remove a can of Lysol from the bottom drawer of

The Harvest Raise

KATIE
SCHUERMAN

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*For Lucy, Becca, Julia, Becky, Kristi, Eliza,
Emily, and Lauren, who joyfully celebrate the
gifts God gives to all of us, even books*

And for Michelle, whose laughter inspires me



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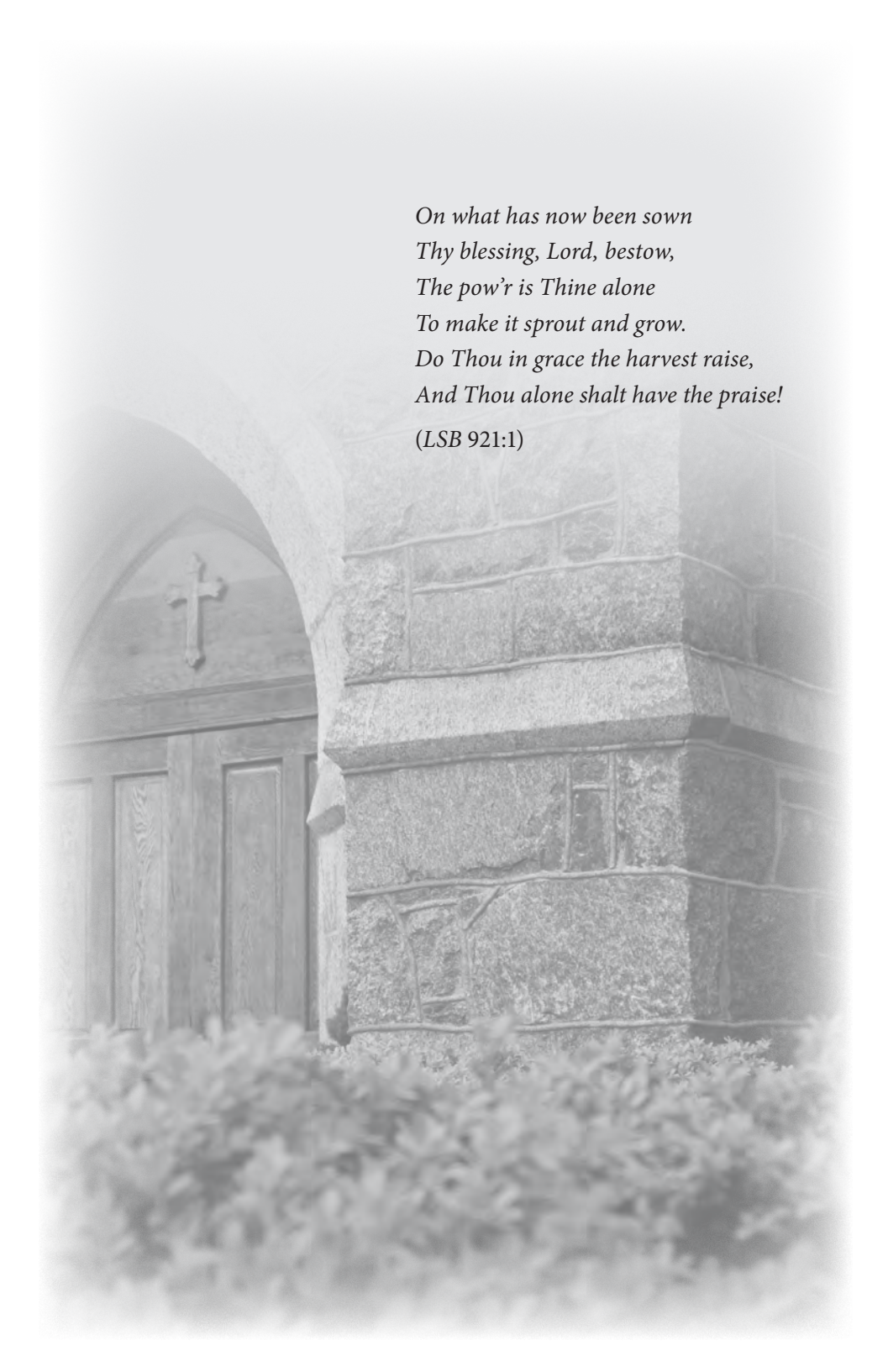
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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 26 25 24 23 22 21 20 19 18 17



*On what has now been sown
Thy blessing, Lord, bestow,
The pow'r is Thine alone
To make it sprout and grow.
Do Thou in grace the harvest raise,
And Thou alone shalt have the praise!*
(LSB 921:1)

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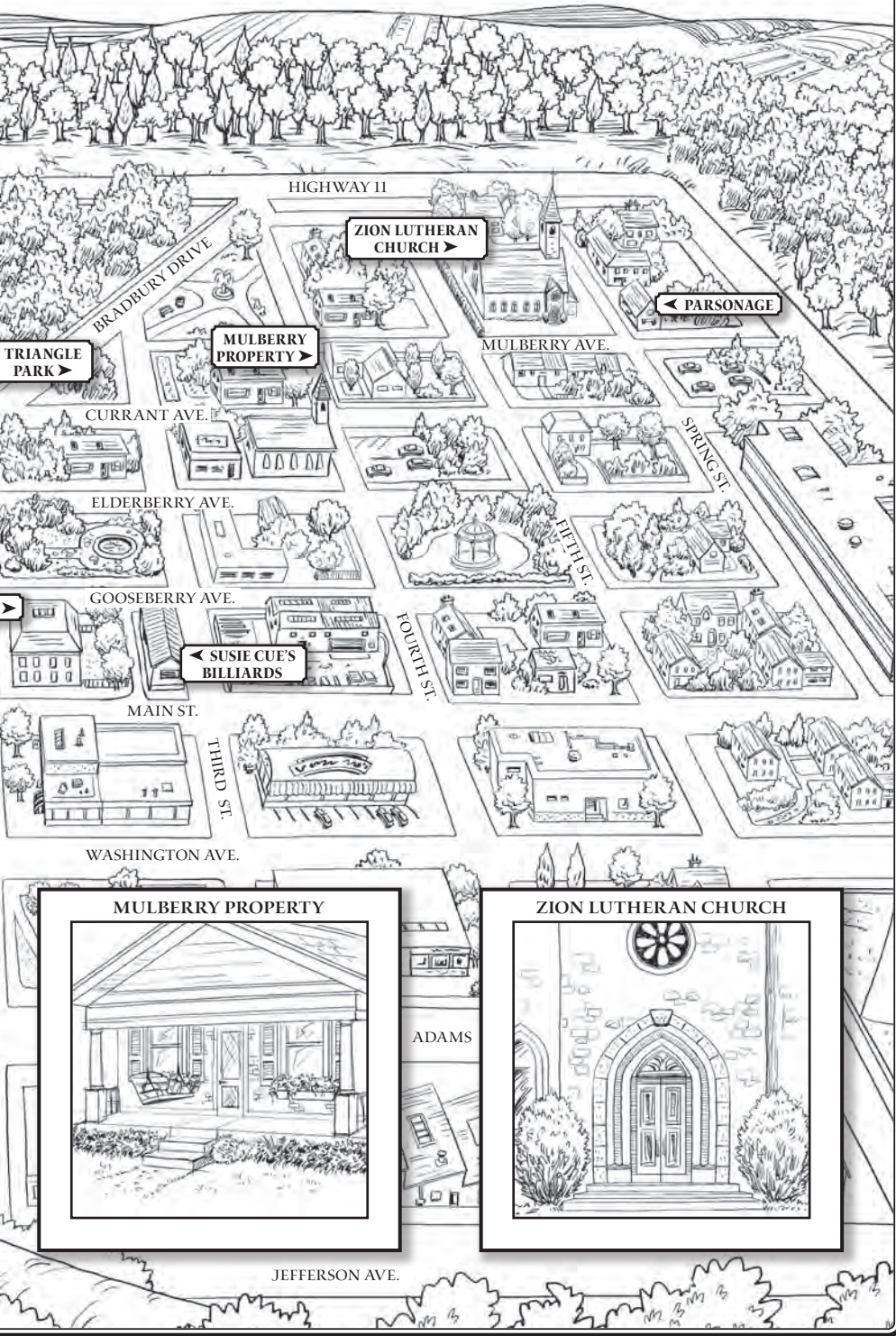
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by Michelle Lynn Swope

Appendix III: Altar Guild 101

Appendix IV: Discussion Questions

Appendix V: Acknowledgments

CHARACTER LIST

Pastor Michael Fletcher—the good and right reverend of Zion Lutheran Church

Mrs. Scheinberg—Zion’s secretary of forty-two years

Emily Duke—Bradbury’s resident sweetheart and doctor of music

Rebecca Jones—Emily’s best friend and local spitfire

Robbie Jones—Rebecca’s middle, freckled son

Beverly Davis—lifelong member of Zion with the gift of gab

Candice Bradbury—wife of Thomas Edison Bradbury III and rightful queen of Bradbury

Caroline Bradbury—the heiress

Ben Schmidt—enterprising farm boy and gentleman extraordinaire

Nettie Schmidt—she may be there, but she’s not all there

Janet Koelster—the fastest spatula in the Midwest

Evan Ebner—Zion’s faithful, phlegmatic organist

Blaine Maler—voted best pianist (and hair) in Bradbury

Mary Hopf—Blaine’s friend from Bradbury College

Yvonne Roe—the grouchiest beauty in all the land with a penchant for earthy piles of sand

Anna Cecilia—no one knows anything better than her, she’s certain of it

Marge Johnson—best known for her Wurlitzer vibrato

Lauren Basset—head of Bradbury College’s music department

Zachary Brandt—Bradbury College’s ever dashing, always available literature professor

CHAPTER ONE: THE BEGINNING OF THE END

The day of salvation had finally come, though it was Mrs. Arlene Compton Scheinberg—not the angel Gabriel—who sounded the proverbial trumpet.

“I’ve decided to retire,” the stodgy secretary announced before the faithful remnant gathered in the front pews of Zion Lutheran Church.

Pastor Michael Fletcher’s jaw fell into his lap. The good reverend had been praying for deliverance from the great tribulation for years—ten years, one month, and nine days, to be exact—ever since Zion’s permed pontificate had first glared at him from her leather throne in the church office and pronounced, “I have barn cats older than you.” But the man was surprised to find his blessed liberation coming on a Tuesday night of all things, for in his dreams—and he had indulged in such dreaming often—the eschatological event came at the end of a work week and in the quiet and privacy of his study. His secretary’s sensitivities were eternally opposed to his own, however. Leave it to Mrs. Scheinberg, who was herself the very opposite of an angel in both stature and countenance, to choose the middle of a church voters’ meeting to blow her horn and end life as everyone knew it in Bradbury.

“What?” Harold Schmidt hollered from his seat in the front pew, cupping an arthritic hand behind his right ear.

Mrs. Scheinberg leaned her heavy bosom forward and barked, “Retire, Hank! I’ve decided to *retire!*”

Harold was practically deaf, but he was the only member of the congregation yet to realize it. “New attire? I thought we came here to vote on repainting the parking lot.”

Nettie, Harold’s devoted bride of sixty years, diplomatically held up a finger to ward off the secretary’s inevitable counterattack. She grabbed a Communion card from the front pew rack, penciled the appropriate verb across the top of the card, and handed the transcription to her impervious husband.

Harold squinted at the card for a long moment before attempting—and failing—to whisper under his breath, “Hallelujah!”

Mrs. Scheinberg’s nostrils danced a flamenco.

Pastor Fletcher stood to intervene, but he fumbled his words. He honestly didn’t know what to say. Now that the happy hour of emancipation had finally arrived, he found himself inflicted with a surprising sadness. Not a full-blown, flu-like melancholy, to be sure, but a twinge, an irritation, a snuffle of sorrow, for even the merry prospect of walking a new earth free of Mrs. Scheinberg and her withering ways did not fully quell his sentimental disposition toward his secretary. The woman was exasperating—that much was certain—but she was also loyal, resourceful, and too tightly woven into the fabric of the church’s life to be yanked loose like some inconsequential thread. He opened his mouth to say as much, but Beverly Davis beat him to it.

“Oh, Arlene!” the cushy, gray-haired woman spouted, sniffing loudly in the fourth pew on the pulpit side and rummaging through her handbag for a tissue. “You can’t leave us!”

“I’m retiring, Bev,” Mrs. Scheinberg frowned, “not moving.”

“You don’t understand,” Bev blubbered, her faucet now turned on full blast. “It just won’t be the same without you sitting behind that desk. You’re the only secretary our church has ever had. There’s never been anyone but you in that office.”

“Arlene is a constitution,” Nettie nodded soberly.

Bev, open-mouthed, paused to consider this fact.

“She means *institution*, honey,” Janet Koelster leaned over to murmur.

“Oh yes,” Bev nodded, deftly picking up where she had left off. Verbal rambles were her specialty. “I simply can’t stand the thought of someone else answering the phone whenever I call the church. It’s just not right. You belong behind that desk, Arlene. You’re irreplaceable, that’s what. I don’t care what Candice or Yvonne or anyone else says.”

Mrs. Scheinberg’s frown lines deepened into ravines. “And what, exactly, do Candice and Yvonne say?”

Candice Bradbury, the town’s self-proclaimed first lady and the congregation’s self-appointed authority in all matters of theology, sociology, psychology, kinesiology, and blame-ology, shrugged amicably from her seat next to Janet and ran a confident hand through her bobbed hair. “All I said was that it would be good to get some new blood in the office. Someone with a little more . . . mobility.”

Everyone held their breath and looked down at their laps, no doubt afraid to make eye contact with the slighted secretary currently leaning heavily on an aluminum cane. Mrs. Scheinberg, in her earlier years, would have pawed at the ground and charged the smug woman like an angry bull, but as it was, she had eaten leftover ham loaf for both lunch and supper that day and her swollen hooves were now rooted to the ground like tree stumps. She settled for defiantly lifting her two chins in the air and declaring, “That is *precisely* why I am retiring, Candice.”

“Well, it’s too late. You can’t retire now.” This came from Yvonne Roe at the back of the crowd.

Mrs. Scheinberg squinted over her gold-rimmed glasses at the white-haired woman wearing pearls and a pressed, long-sleeved blouse to a casual meeting in June. “What do you mean, ‘I can’t retire *now*?’ It’s my decision, Yvonne. I can retire whenever I want, thank you very much.”

“How can you be so selfish, Arlene?” Yvonne chirped. The woman’s dark eyebrows arched in righteous condemnation like two fuzzy caterpillars flinching under the threat of a white storm cloud. “You know very well that there is no one else in this congregation available to cover the phones. You, at least, have time for such things.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake!” Mrs. Scheinberg snorted through her nose. “There’re plenty of people in this church capable of running an office.”

“Like who?”

“Well, you, for one.”

Yvonne smiled wanly. “I watch my grandchildren every weekday.”

Mrs. Scheinberg’s neck grew splotchy. She didn’t have any children, let alone grandchildren, and Pastor Fletcher knew that fact embarrassed her. He silently willed one of his elders to speak up. Honestly, any man would do—any man other than Hank, that is—but every person growing facial hair or wearing a necktie or holding a corn seed hat in hand averted his eyes and busied himself picking at his fingernails. Pastor sighed. However faithful the men in his congregation were, they had fallen into a bad habit of remaining quiet whenever things got noisy in voters’ meetings, especially if the noise was estrogenic in origin. He opened his mouth to say something, but Mrs. Scheinberg recovered enough to speak. She was used to fending for herself.