

The logo for "Cross Currents" features a stylized orange cross symbol to the left of the text. "Cross" is written in a bold, dark brown font, and "Currents" is written below it in a similar font.

### *Surrounded by Friends*

After cataloging in 2 Corinthians 4:9 an incredible list of hardships and hurdles to his ministry, the apostle Paul continued his sentence in Today's English Version with a highly significant *but*. Life has been really tough, he says, "*but* we are never without a friend."

Can you think of a finer blessing?

A couple of weeks before Christmas last year, I set aside two days to attend to a huge task. During December every year I send out a letter to several hundred donors whose gifts make possible my devotional magazine, *The Christian Appeal*.

Although it is time consuming, I scribble a personal note on the bottom of each letter.

As I penned those brief greetings last year, at some point in the task I was struck by the fact that the majority of the people I was writing to have been my dear friends for years—many of them for decades.

Name after name on the letters triggered a flood of heart-warming memories. I have stayed in their homes, eaten at their tables, and preached in their churches. In more than half a century of ministry I have shared a jillion cups of coffee with these dear people and broken bread with them. With some of them I have fished and hiked and toured the scenic vistas near their homes.

Writing "Merry Christmas" on those letters reminded me of hilarious moments of genuine merriment when these friends and I laughed until tears ran down our cheeks. But that familiar greeting also made me acutely conscious that I had also wept bitter tears of heartbreak with some of those friends.

What a blessing these dear people are to me. How barren my life would be without the love and encouragement of these good friends.

Focusing on these friendships helped me to understand why Paul seldom could write a letter without tagging on greetings to and from his friends.

It gave me new appreciation for the apostle John's opening words in his third letter. "To my dear friend Gaius, whom I love in the truth," John wrote, and then in the next verse he prayed for that precious friend's well-being both in body and soul.

"Pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up," the Scriptures counsel us (Eccl. 4:10). I can't imagine anything tougher than life without friends.

**By Gene Shelburne**