

# An Interview with Denis Haack

*Conceived, prepared, and written by Margie Haack who knows him well enough to put words in his mouth.*



**Denis Haack, Founder and Director of Ransom Fellowship**

**Margie Haack (MH):** Let's start with: how did Ransom Fellowship begin?

**Denis (DH):** Ransom was an idea which germinated while I was on staff with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, a ministry to college students. IV was very keen on a particular Bible study method which I found helpful for myself and for students. I began to see that in the same way we studied Scripture through asking questions—such as what is being said in this passage, what does it mean, and then what do we do about it—that we could use the same ideas when we engaged in the culture around us. When we saw a movie, attended a concert, or just read a journal article from our trade or profession we didn't need to simply react or merely let it happen, we could think about it.

When I began showing movies followed by discussions with groups of students we began by asking ourselves if we were really listening to what was being said. Or were we just reacting according to a certain party line? Were we putting our minds on idle and merely being entertained? As I began to see and hear more carefully and not just to be entertained or to react, it led us to a deeper understanding of cultural issues and often that led to a purely natural opening for conversation with the people around us. Films, for example were often asking significant questions about life, death, and meaning, and it was right in front of our faces. We also found that watching a film in our living room became an inviting setting for our non-Christian friends.

The more we did this with students, the more our friends said, hey, please consider not limiting this to the campus, but come and do it with us, in our home, or with our church, or with our small group, etc. Eventually we went part-time with InterVarsity and began to work locally with individuals and groups of people. That soon evolved into a full-time ministry which we called Ransom Fellowship.

**MH:** Where did the name "Ransom Fellowship" originate?

**DH:** In 1983 when we were about to incorporate as a non-profit organization we realized we needed a name that would represent us. We liked the word ransom because it is richly layered and very meaningful to a Christian. When Christ came, Scripture says he gave himself as a ransom for many. We are part of God's ransomed people, and by his grace we hoped our ministry could involve some of that Holy Spirit process of ransoming—of helping to equip and call people to himself.

The other source of the word comes from C.S. Lewis. In *Out of the Silent Planet*, the first book of his space trilogy, the main character is a man named Ransom. Although he is very human and at times imperfect, he becomes a type of redeemer or savior. He was also a man who learned that understanding the times in which he lived was a matter of life and death. We too feel it is of paramount importance for Christians to be discerning about the times and the culture in which we live or we will not be able to authentically and winsomely communicate the gospel.

**MH:** How did you end up in Rochester, MN?

**DH:** Both my wife and I are from Minnesota. That is, she is native, I was sort of a transplant via Massachusetts and the Philippine Islands where my parents were missionaries. After our marriage we ended up living in Albuquerque, NM, for twelve years. As time went on we felt it was important to be closer to extended family, especially for the sake of our children, so we moved back to Minnesota in 1981.

But there was another reason, as well. I had always wanted to study at L'Abri. We owe a great spiritual debt to Francis and Edith Schaeffer. At the time it didn't seem possible for me to study at the Swiss L'Abri, however, we learned that Dr. Schaeffer was being treated for lymphoma at the Mayo Clinic which was located in Rochester, Minnesota. L'Abri began a branch there which gave us the chance to be students while living in our own home and working at the same time. Often I was the only student around and I felt as if I were privately tutored by him. It was my privilege to get to know him and study with him until his death in 1984.

**MH:** Did your background prepare you for a ministry that emphasizes cultural engagement and discernment?

**DH:** First let me say that, contrary to what some might think, people cannot live without some sort of cultural engagement. Culture is intrinsic to the human community. So no matter how some may try to isolate themselves or their children from any kind of engagement, it isn't really possible. As Tom Beaudoin writes in his book *Virtual Faith*—particularly for the current generation—“popular culture is part of the very air we breathe, it is the amniotic fluid which nurtured us.” The question is how, as Christians, are we to be discerning about it in a way that does not deny our humanity and yet glorifies God? As we watch a movie, read a novel, listen to music, or attend an art show, we should be asking: what does this reveal to us about the nature of reality? About the transcendent? Or morality? And how does it line up with what we know to be true? Things like that.

**MH:** Did you answer my question?

**DH:** No, uh, I guess I didn't. And no, on the surface it didn't prepare me. On the other hand I believe in God's providence—that by it He equips us for our calling in life, so nothing is wasted. I was raised in an isolated corner of fundamentalism where I was taught that the Bible was sufficient for all things. In a sense that is true and I am thankful for the amount of memorization and knowledge I was required to profess, but, of course, simple knowledge is not enough to ransom us. [grins]

Culture was seen as the enemy and it was worldly to be involved in it any more than you had to be. For example, one might need a college course which required that you know the French Impressionists, but all you did was learn the facts for test purposes so you could get out of there and onto the more important things in life such as reading the Bible and witnessing. We were in constant retreat from the world.

**MH:** Did you lead a sheltered life while growing up?

**DH:** That would be me. For three reasons. One, our isolation was deepened because our church did not recognize other Christians as being genuine. Two, my parents were missionaries to the P.I. which had built-in isolation for me. And three, I was an introverted, geeky kid. That did not predispose me to breaking out.

**MH:** So how did you go from argyle socks and the King James Bible to teaching a seminary course on Film and Theology? You seem pretty cool now.

**DH:** My wife had a lot to do with this. We pretty much made the whole journey together and she has always been more comfortable with change and risks. I don't think I could have done it without her. [MH preens.]

**MH:** Does she make you wear that necklace? Do you have a tattoo? What translation of the Bible do you use?

**DH:** [Raises eyebrows and does not answer.]

**MH:** Well, then. Risks. What happened to your faith during college?

**DH:** College precipitated a crisis of faith. I was attending the University of Minnesota as a science major, but needed some liberal arts credits to complete my requirements. I took an art history class and remember sitting in the darkened auditorium looking at a slide of abstract art by Miro, hearing the prof explain what the artist was doing and I thought, this is creative, beautiful, meaningful, and painted by someone on his way to hell and I should not be appreciating it. The only art I had grown up with were framed Scripture verses embellished with vines and flowers. The more I opened my eyes, all around me creation, art, music, beauty leapt to life. Within

my narrow religious framework there was no place to put these things because they were not essential to the gospel. In fact they were distractions from what was important.

That was where the crack began, and it wasn't until someone gave me a copy of Francis Schaeffer's *The God Who is There* that I again became hopeful that Christianity might have some universal relevance to life. Eventually I was able to affirm orthodox Christianity and I learned the joy of knowing Christ is Lord over all of life. So in relation to popular culture, his Lordship means we will find moments of common grace and traces of the image of God even in the midst of a very broken and sinful world. This was, well, it was breathtaking to me.

**MH:** How did you meet Margie?

**DH:** We were both taking the same chemistry class at the same time. In retrospect it was part of God's timing and providence because there were hundreds of students taking the same course in many different sections. She always sat down front taking notes, near where I sat. As we talked, I learned she was a Christian and I tried to recruit her for my church's student group, but she thought I was asking her for a date. When she said yes and then later learned I arranged for this married guy to pick her up and take her to an event she was mad. To put it mildly. But I think she was probably embarrassed by the misunderstanding.

**MH:** Misunderstanding? I guess you didn't have a lot of finesse?

**DH:** I was doing my job.

**MH:** [Shrieks] Well, WHY didn't you tell me that in the first place?

**DH:** Because it didn't OCCUR to me! [Looks around nervously for an exit.]

**MH:** [Clears Throat] So you got off to a bit of a rocky start?

**DH:** Yes. But she was intelligent, attractive, athletic, a kind of 60's Sidney Bristow and what began as a slow burn ended up as a lifetime love.

**MH:** [Looks mollified.] Tell us what difference your partnership has made to your ministry?

**DH:** As Christians we may have all the right theology, the right questions, the defensible answers, but unless we have a place of safety and warmth in which to have relationships with real people, we won't be very effective. Our desire has been to make our home a place of interest and beauty where people could come and know that any sort of question or topic could be addressed. An intimate place where we share needs, music, conversation, and allow the power of God to be demonstrated in ordinary everyday ways. We feel that hospitality is more and more necessary to reach this current generation as an antidote to the brokenness and alienation so many have experienced. This has been integral to our calling and ministry. And it seems that together our gifts combine to make this more possible.

**MH:** Speaking of gifts, are you musical?

**DH:** [looks suspicious] No. I play the VCR and CDs.

**MH:** Didn't you once own an electric guitar?

**DH:** Where is this going?

**MH:** I'm asking the questions. Where did you get it?

**DH:** I traded it. [Long pause.] For our couch and an easy chair.

**MH:** Didn't you throw in our electric knife for good measure?

**DH:** You never used it. [Groans.] That was a long time ago.

**MH:** Well, did you learn to play it?

**DH:** No. Not really. I think I learned a couple of chords.

**MH:** Did you learn Stairway to Heaven?

**DH:** No!! I thought maybe I could lead choruses with it.

**MH:** And why were you getting rid of the couch and chair?

**DH:** Look. I don't think I have to answer that.

**MH:** But people will want to know.

**DH:** [Deep sigh.] Okay. The short story is that when I reached my lowest point of doubt and it seemed Christianity was a lost cause, I thought I would give it one last go before giving it up and becoming a hedonist. At that time I came across the Scripture verse that says except you sell all you have and give it away you cannot be my disciple. I decided we ought to try that. Give it all up and see what came of it. I told Margie about it and asked her if she would do this with me. We'd only been married for a year, but we had all this stuff, wedding gifts and things. A car that was paid for.



A Newly Wed Denis (1969)

**MH:** What was her response?

**DH:** She wasn't too happy at first. She said she'd pray about it over night.

**MH:** [Interrupting] Yeah. I cried over night. I was sort of in shock. I mean, I wanted you to love God and to serve him and all. And I had been praying for that, but this was pretty radical. Because when you first said "I found this verse and I want us to do what it says," I was so eager and self-righteous. I thought I was ready for anything. That night I had, oh, I guess it was a sort of epiphany. Not audible, but certainly in spirit I knew God was saying, "You weren't expecting this as an answer to your prayers, were you? I want you to trust me through this."

**DH:** And by the next morning you started planning a garage sale. We sold everything, our wedding gifts, our car, gave the money away, and joined an evangelistic team that worked in inner cities. The couch and chair was left over from the sale, and I thought the guitar might help our team.

**MH:** My consolation for our asceticism was a double sleeping bag so we could sleep together on the floors of church basements as we traveled.

[MH Laughs. DH looks pained]

**DH:** The thing is, we ended up in Albuquerque where we joined a Christian commune. God's kindness and care has been evident throughout our lives, but in looking back we can see how those strange times especially prepared us for the direction our ministry would take with Ransom. Involvement with popular culture continues to give us windows of insight into the postmodern generation. It can also give moments truth and grace which allow us to connect and to share the gospel.

**MH:** And your living room? Is it still bare?

**DH:** [Laughs] Not at all. What amazes us is how much of what we had was given back to us in one form or another. Not that we expected it. My reading of that text of Scripture is more nuanced now, at the same time my ignorance and immaturity back then did not stop God's work in our lives. And I'm really thankful for that.

**MH:** You mentioned children earlier. How many do you have?

**DH:** Three. Two daughters and a son who are, as of this year, grown and gone. But not far. Our daughter Marsena is married to Jeff and living in Lake Zurich, IL. She happens to be managing editor of both Critique and Notes From Toad Hall. She has also designed and manages Ransom's website. Jerem is married Micah in November 2002 and lives near Warroad, MN. He works for Marvin Windows and cannot believe he has found someone as delightful as Micah to share his life. (They are way too cute together.) They have one son, Anson. And then there is Sember who is married to Shaun. They married in May 2002. Shaun is an artist who almost makes a living at it, which is pretty rare. Which also means he's pretty good. They have four children which rather boggles my mind.

**MH:** Has being a father affected your life or ministry? As if it wouldn't!

**DH:** Next to my wife, our children have been most influential in shaping my life, my character, my walk with God. Without them I would be more arrogant, completely impatient as opposed to somewhat, far less trusting of God, less tolerant, and less aware of what the "burning issues" are for postmoderns. They have been a source of both painful growth and inexpressible joy. I cannot explain why they seem to love me despite my failures as a parent, but I am thankful. The other joy of having been a father is our grandchildren. There is hardly anything I would not do for her. I have often told my wife that it would be a wonderful trick to just go directly to grandparenting. So, yes, I think being a father has had the net effect of making me more compassionate and more authentic person. They've helped keep me anchored in the real world.

[MH nods in agreement.]

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