

Wineskins Magazine

The Christmas Narratives

Volume 1, Number 7 – November 1992

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The Ultimate Thrill of Christmas

by Mike Cope
November, 1992

Though we sometimes speak of “the Christmas story,” Scripture doesn’t really offer just one story. Rather, it contains Christmas stories.

Luke’s Christmas account is the one we’re used to. Luke’s pages are filled with swaddling clothes, a manger, shepherds, angels singing “glory to God in the highest” and Mary treasuring everything in her heart.

Matthew’s Christmas story isn’t as sweet and homey. It’s not the one you like to read to your kids. Matthew tells of the massacre of babies and of Rachel refusing to be consoled.

John – true to form – offers his Christmas story through theological symbolism. Jesus was the word who became flesh to dwell among us, thereby revealing the Father.

And Revelation exposes the flip side of Jesus’ birth. The writer presents Christmas not as tinsel and mistletoe but as a great red dragon chasing a pregnant woman.

Whatever biblical account we select, Christmas is a life-changing event that goes beyond fond family memories. As Henri Nouwen has written:

“Songs, good feelings, beautiful liturgies, nice presents, big dinners, and many sweet words do not make Christmas. Christmas is saying ‘yes’ to something beyond all emotions and feelings. Christmas is saying ‘yes’ to a hope based on God’s work, not mine.”

Paul’s own miniature Christmas sermon points us in the right direction: “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9).

And how rich we are! Called to be God’s sons and daughters. Filled with the Spirit of God. Baptized into a community of faith to share our new convictions. Inspired by a vision of the world that knows what the final outcome will be. Cleansed! And all because “he became poor.”

This Christmas, while we hang the stockings, while we focus the camcorder, while we pass the pumpkin pie, and while we sing about the red-nosed reindeer, let us not forget to give thanks for the supreme gift of God. Without Bethlehem, there could be no Golgotha.

Let us also give thanks that we have been allowed to participate in this birth. For as Corrie Ten Boom has well said, “If Jesus were born one thousand times in Bethlehem and not in me, then I would still be lost.” The ultimate thrill of Christmas is that God has graciously saved us through Jesus Christ.

Christmas at Matthew's House

by André Resner
November, 1992

I'm at Matthew's house for Christmas and Matthew is sneaky. He's almost too matter-of-fact for me. I need some intonation. I need some exclamation marks. Maybe a couple of winks. A raised eyebrow here and there. A gasp. As he tells the story in his almost-documentary style I miss some things. I missed four women in the genealogy. I missed the whole genealogy the first 24 or 25 years that I read Matthew's account, not to mention Rachel and her murdered children.

It's intriguing. How do you begin a gospel of Jesus Christ? Each evangelist was faced with the dilemma. How would they frame the beginning? Where does the story of the good news of God's incarnation best begin? For John you have to go back, way back, before time began. For Luke the beginning of the gospel is a full-fledged musical with sopranos and tenors, altos and basses all joining in a chorus of angels bending near the earth. For Mark, it's no musical, it's the gospel. For him the paradox of the good news is that it begins out in the desert, with a voice crying out amidst the hot, dry, barrenness of life.

For Matthew it begins in sexual scandal and it ends in political power plays. Before he can tell the scandal of Mary's "immaculate conception," he has to subtly remind us of other scandalous women. You remember Tamar, don't you? The woman who couldn't wait for the patriarch Judah to come through with his promised third son for her. Seems Judah didn't want another of his boys dying in her bed. Two was enough. She was bad luck. But he underestimated the seriousness with which she took his promise. It is hard to know what powerful emotions possessed her that morning as she awakened, went to her closet and passed over the widow clothes she had been wearing day after day, week after week, year after year, since she'd been sent away to her father's house to wait for Shelah to grow up. he had long since grown up. And she had long failed to see him walking up the dusty road to her house. This morning she took her red dress out and pulled on those fishnet stockings and began gobbing on the make-up. Sht put on her black, spiked heels and hobbled down the road to Timnah where, word had it, Judah was headed on business. It seems Judah's wife had died recently and he had fulfilled his mourning duties. After a while she saw Judah coming up the road. And he saw an entrepreneur, open for business. he figured he was making good time and could take a little break, and so after agreeing on a price, and leaving all his Ancient Near Eastern credit cards as collateral, we're told that he "slept with her, and she became pregnant by him. After she left, she took off her veil and put on her widow's clothes again" (Genesis 38:18-19). Judah tried to send the promised goat to the "temple prostitute" (although it's clear that he considered her an ordinary whore earlier) and reclaim his "Everywhere You Want To Be" pledge. Perhaps he was looking at the experience in religious terms now, or maybe he just wanted everyone else to. But, no one else seemed to know of her, so the matter sort of blew over.

A few months later Judah received some of the best news he'd ever received: Shelah was safe! Tamar had lost her sexual patience and good sense, had "played the whore" and Judah had the power to pass sentence: "Let her be brought out and burned." But while being dragged out she

held aloft three items, saying, “It was the owner of these who made me pregnant. Take not, please, whose these are” Everyone could plainly see stamped across the bottom of the green one, “JUDAH, MEMBER SINCE 1750 B.C.E.” And it’s Matthew who can’t go three verses without obliquely reminding us that this scandalous story he’s begun to tell began a long time ago, and it too began in scandal.

But Matthew doesn’t stop there. he goes on to break more rules, raise more eyebrows, and make us wonder how much our Puritan Christian heritage has induced us to overlook these furtive reminders of scandal embedded in the text. He reminds us of Rahab. You remember Rahab. Prostitute in the promised land. The first place, interestingly enough, that the Israelite spies went when they went to explore the land. And Ruth ... “dear, sweet Ruth.” We’ll, just what was she doing out there at the threshing floor at Boaz’s feet? And why did he want her to stay there all night, yet leave before daylight, and not let anybody see her. HmMMM.

Matthew’s not done yet. He then brings up the most famous sexual mishap in Hebrew heritage: Bathsheba. He doesn’t mention her by name, choosing the circumlocution “the wife of Uriah.” But such a way of referring to her only heightens the scandal, for we are reminded of the lust which led to adultery, which led to deceit, which led to murder, which led to cover-up, which led to a history of these very same things with David’s own children.

Why does Matthew remind us of these people and their embarrassingly scandalous stories? How can “good news” start like this? And how could the early church think that this was the most appropriate way to start the “New Testament”? It could be because the most embarrassing scandal was about to be told and Matthew wanted to show that such an outlandishly embarrassing story was not out of line with the way God had always seen things done in this world. Maybe when God works in this world it is precisely these kinds of persons and events through which he works his will and grace. Maybe that’s part of the good news.

Though we’re still quite surprised by Matthew’s covert statement “she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit,” Matthew has set us up for it. It’s a sort of “Here we go again, folks....” Another sexually questionable woman. And what about Joseph’s faith in the face of Mary’s story? For it was he, who after a single dream, went ahead and married her. A dream that was real, yes, but still a dream. Could it have been a message from God? Or, could it have been his won imagination, wanting to believe her so much that his subconscious produced a nocturnal justification for marrying her, even in the face of such an outlandish excuse? But there’s Joseph, crawling into bed with her every night the rest of his life, relying on a dream, believing in her word, that she really hadn’t slept with another man and used him to cover her shame. If we’ve paid attention to the women of Matthew’s genalogy we’re not entirely surprised by Mary’s (Joseph’s?!) predicament. If God used those of the Messiah’s family tree thus, why wouldn’t the Messiah himself come from a similar situation?

But that’s not all for Matthew. There’s more than domestic trouble in Jesus’ birth; there are political troubles. It seems that Jesus’ birth signalled a conflict of kingship. And it would take a fragile, yet capricious man like King Herod to feel his power and authority threatened by an impoverished tradesman’s baby. So, a couple of dreams later, dreams which tricked Herod and put Jesus out of his psychopathic reach, Herod dispatched to Bethlehem troops ready for battle.

They surrounded the city and targeted his most recent threat to the empire, all the children two years of age and under. I guess he figured he'd be sure to get Jesus if he expanded the target range to two years and included both male and female babies. Better safe than sorry, after all, when you're dealing with such guerrillas. The Jews had known of such horror before. They had seen their little ones on the ends of spears. Jewish mothers had been forced less than 200 years earlier to wear their dead babies around their necks. But how could it happen now, now that the Messiah had come? How was this "Gospel"? "A voice was heard in Raham, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, for they were no more."

Well, Herod died. Joseph had another dream and they came back home ... well, almost home. Seems another dream landed them in Nazareth.

I'm starting to wonder, "Just how is this Christmas, Matthew?" Just how does this affect our season of anticipation and celebration? Do we want to perhaps flip channels to Luke's musical and be done with Matthew's docu-drama-tragedy, or conflate the two as we've normally done, thus shaving the edge off of Matthew's story? If we hid the remote control and have the courage to listen to Matthew's side of the story, I think our season of anticipation and celebration in faith is given an important cast. For we're reminded that it's not unusual for those rare times when God breaks decisively into this, his world, that it causes confusion, turmoil, great joy, profound misunderstanding, defensive posturing of people in powerful places, dividing even households against one another, and forcing unprecedented and lifelong decisions of faith. Having Christmas at Matthew's house, we aren't to be completely surprised if we experience such upheaval ourselves, but overawed, humbled, and expectant that in such times of tumult God is acting in ways that will forever change the way humans have viewed him, the world, and the community of faith.

With such a beginning to his story, the cross looms over every scene of Christmas at Matthew's house. The cross isn't alien to Matthew's Christmas. Probably because the cross isn't alien to the way most of life is lived in this world. The cross, in fact, gives us a lense through which to dream, to believe, to wail with Rachel and refuse consolation for our loss in this world. For such refusal of consolation in this world places us in a position to both receive what Jesus' first coming meant and lean anxiously toward that which his second coming will bring. As George Steiner has recently suggested, that is the place we, along with most humankind, are in – a place in-between – a place called Saturday: a place between the reality of the cross on the one hand, and all the sufferng for sin and failure and power struggles that it embodies, and Sunday on the other hand, with all the hope, resolution, reunion and rest that it promises.

It could be that, like me, you'll be having Christmas at Matthew's house this year. If so, expect the incredulous, watch out for the paranoid and powerful, and most importantly, have pleasant dreams ...

For further reading:

Alter, Robert. *The Art of Biblical Narrative*.

Steiner, George. *Real Presences*.

The God of Impossibilities

by Jack R. Reese

November, 1992

They were an ordinary couple – just plain folks. Nothing in their demeanor, their clothes, their accent revealed their role in the divine drama. At no time in their lives had Mary and Joseph been among the privileged. They were just common people who placed their trust in the Lord.

With great economy of language and considerable subtlety, Luke tells the story of a God who does extraordinary things through ordinary people.

Mary and Joseph were anonymous villagers in an insignificant province. Elizabeth and Zechariah were an elderly couple whose righteous living was overshadowed by the stigma of childlessness. Simeon and Anna were strange characters in a teeming crowd of worshippers and sightseers. It is through such people that the Lord chose to work.

Not all of the people in Luke's story are ordinary. Two giants loom in the background: the ruling powers in Rome and the religious establishment in Jerusalem. Luke mentions many of the powerful secular leaders of the day, men such as Augustus, Quirinius, Tiberus, Pontius Pilate, and Herod. And much of the early action takes place within the shadow of the Temple under the administration of Caiaphas and Annas. Extraordinary people all.

But two poor Galileans, strangers to power and influence, quietly make their way to Bethlehem.

We read too much into Luke's story when we suggest that the innkeeper in Bethlehem turned them away. This is not a rejection story. It is an ordinary event involving rather common people.

They had travelled to a *khan* or *cravansary* – it was no English-style inn with a front desk and nice rooms, but a place where poorer travellers could spend the night. It is not surprising that the stalls where families were bedded were full.

Mary and Joseph graciously were provided a place near the central fire where the animals were secured. It is not less than they would have expected and no great burden. In Galilee and Judea it was not uncommon to sleep to the sound and smell of animals.

And it was there that the baby was born.

Mary had no one to attend to her so she herself wrapped the boy in strips of cloth and placed him in a nearby animal trough. The savior of the world lay helplessly near his family. Who there would have known? From all appearances it was a birth like thousands of births.

News of the event was first made known, not to Roman leaders or Jewish religious authorities, but to lowly citizens of the area, shepherds busy with their work. They would later tell with amazement the story of the visit from angels, not knowing that for centuries people all over the

world would still know of a band of common shepherds who were led by the Lord to visit the newborn king.

On the eighth day, Joseph and Mary offered a sacrifice in the Temple – not the sacrifice of a lamb as a wealthier family might offer, but just a couple of small birds. Hundreds of people were there at the Temple, but only two noticed the dedication of the boy: Simeon and Anna, an old man and an old woman guided by the Holy Spirit to bless the child.

Then, Luke says, the young family returned to Galilee where the boy grew strong and was filled with wisdom. This simple story demands no sentimentalizing or embellishment. Our Christmas tales often miss the point. These were ordinary people through whom God worked extraordinarily.

Luke makes it clear that this has always been God's way and will continue to be. Mary sings of the Lord who has "brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly," who has "filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty." Zechariah sings of the inbreaking of the "dawn from on high" which will "give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death."

No human power or competence can lift the lowly and fill the hungry with good things. No piety or religious servitude can make possible the dawning from on high.

We stand with Mary and Joseph as ordinary people, women and men whose lives do not merit God's extraordinary intervention. It is for us Jesus came, God entering human flesh so that we might taste the eternal, the divine transforming the carnal into its own image..

When we see what the Lord has done, we cannot help but cry out with Mary, "How can this be?" How can our ordinary lives be imbued with such extraordinary power and glory? Mary and Joseph may be larger-than-life characters faithfully receiving the blessings of God. We have never known them in any other way. Our earliest recollections of them establish them firmly as heroes – almost mythical characters.

But we know ourselves to be too faithless, too weak, too sinful, too ordinary to receive such divine favor from the Lord. "How can this be?" we ask.

Perhaps, then, we need to hear the angel's reply, "Nothing is impossible with God."

The Nativity: The Word Finally Spoken

by Michael Card
November, 1992

When we speak of the nativity of Jesus of Nazareth we invariably turn to the pages of Matthew or Luke. There we find wise men and shepherds, a stable and a star, the scenery of Christmas. Rarely if ever do we go to John's Gospel during December. The prologue of John, which speaks so wonderfully of the incarnation, has largely been relegated to theological discussion and debate. There is no smell of the stable about it.

"There are no birth narratives in the Gospel of John," my professors at the university would always say. John, writing his Gospel last, systematically excludes stories from the synoptics and inserts new ones resulting in the fact that 92 percent of the content of his book is unique. While I see no need to challenge that point of view, I wonder if there is more going on in the prologue than selective remembering on John's part.

He is the last living apostle. Peter is long dead, crucified upside down. James, his own brother, is gone too. Even Paul, who came so late to faith, has lost his head to Nero. The young believers in John's community no doubt regarded him with a particular awe. "That's him," they would reverently whisper, "the elder, the one He loved!"

John has had a lifetime to look back, to ponder in his own heart all the wondrous things Jesus had said and done. Mary, Jesus' mother, has been a part of his extended family for no one knows how long. So she too, had been with him. The features of her face perhaps reminding him of Jesus, her smile, her sense of humor, her gentle laugh perhaps, constantly reminding John of the man he so loved and longed to see again.

When he finally sits down to write his account, as he replays all the events of the birth which Mary has no doubt recounted to him again and again, what John decides to speak about is not the scenery or the sets of the nativity. He goes straight to the heart of the matter. When he tells us about the One he calls the Word and his "coming" into this dark world two words come to the surface of his mind: Light and Life.

These two concepts, attributes, qualities, are what John remembers most clearly about him. He remembers the sound, moreover the tone of Jesus' voice as he referred to himself by both these names. Of all that he is to John and to us, He is Light and He is Life.

"In him was life," John writes. He was not merely alive, though he was certainly that. Mary remembers the sound of his cry. But more than that, infinitely more, life was in him. Life that was more than breathing and a heartbeat, but whatever it is that breathing and beating hearts are a result of, Life, the very thing itself, was in him. He was it; Life had come alive. It was in him so he had it to give. In fact, that is precisely why he had come.

"That Life was the Light of men," John scratches onto the parchment. He pushes himself back from the desk and remembers a thousand examples of the truth of what he has just written.

Remembers dark people who after a simple word or a touch went away with this same light alive on their faces. Remembers how this light first came blazing into his own personal darkness when Jesus asked, "What do you want?" Life that was alive and that was light. That is what he was.

There is, I believe, a birth narrative in the first chapter of John's Gospel. It is only one verse but it says as much about Jesus as the other narratives, though it doesn't contain as much information.

"The Light shines in the darkness but the darkness has not understood it."

This is John's nativity. It should be read before Matthew and Luke because it prepares us to hear them more clearly. In one sense it contains them both. The Light that Jesus is shines into, around, and above the darkness of the stable, the darkness of the world, and the deep darkness of our own hearts. But it is not understood, not by the wise men, nor the simple shepherds, nor by you and me. We cannot comprehend how Light and Life can be alive in a person. No one can. We are left, like the wise men and the shepherds, to adore and to wonder how this can be, to pray for the Life to come to life in us and ask God to let this person who is the Light shine in our own hearts this Christmas ... forever.

Christmas According to the Apocalypse

*by Rubel Shelly
November, 1992*

The Christmas Story is in the final book of the Bible? While everyone correctly associates the incarnation with the Gospels, it may strike you as odd that we call you to the book of Revelation to round out the message of this issue.

As a matter of fact, practically every great theme of the Bible comes to its crescendo in the Apocalypse. It is the great book of fulfillment to Christian faith. It assures believers that evil cannot triumph over good, error over truth, Satan over Christ. And part of that assurance relates directly to Bethlehem, as well as to Jerusalem, Rome, and your home city.

The first half of Revelation (chapters 1-11) gives a general overview of the conflict between the church and Rome; it assures beleaguered saints that God is securely enthroned in heaven and has not forgotten his struggling people. The second half (chapters 12-22) focuses attention on the devastation to be visited against persecuting Rome; it reveals the contents of the little scroll John was required to take and eat at Revelation 10:9-11.

If you will pause at this point to read chapter 12 in its entirety, you cannot fail to be caught up in its dramatic imagery.

The radiant woman about to give birth is Old Testament Israel, who, in the person of the virgin Mary, gave birth to the Christ. The Old Testament impression of Israel being “with child” and laboring to bring the messiah-redeemer into the world (cf. Isaiah 26:17-18) became reality in the stable at Bethlehem.

The red dragon anxious to destroy the child at birth is identified at verse nine as Satan. Yet, since Satan typically works through his evil agents, he is Herod the Great, the devil in the wilderness, rabbis trying to trap Jesus in his speech, Caiaphas, the mob with its chants of “Crucify him!”, cowardly Pilate, and mockers at the crucifixion scene all rolled into one sickening visage of evil. The purpose of this scene in the Apocalypse is neither to give a detailed account of the birth and ministry of Christ nor to itemize all his encounters with Satan. Thus it moves immediately from his imperiled birth to his glorious ascension.

As the Christ child is caught up to heaven for his own protection, a frustrated and angry Satan attempts to pursue him right into heaven itself. There he is met by Michael and his angels, defeated, and cast down to earth. This is not, of course, either a literal recounting of events or, as some may have supposed, a reference to the origin of the devil. It is a dramatic account of the sovereignty of God and his power to become victorious over Satan and his host.

When heaven’s inhabitants see this struggle and its outcome, they burst into praise. At verse 11, their praise is offered to the blood of the Lamb and to the gospel: “They overcame him by the blood of the lamb and by the word of their testimony ...” Salvation is credited to grace, not to the strategy or daring of Christ’s followers.

Unable to destroy the child at birth or by storming heaven, the dragon next turns on the woman who gave birth to the child. Israel, now surely the “true Israel” or church redeemed by Christ’s blood, will be harassed and hounded by him. This reminds us that the persecution of God’s people is never a coincidence of history but is always due to the opposition of Satan.

Against the flood of evil that comes against the church during the “time, times, and half a time” (i.e., the recurring three and one-half years the Lamb’s enemies are in control of things, cf. Revelation 11:2), God causes the earth to open its mouth and absorb its waters. Whether against the corporate church of history or against individual believers (i.e., “the rest of [the woman’s] seed”), Satan’s attacks are vicious and constant. Yet God’s presence as the faithful deliverer of his people is also constant.

Isn’t this a critical part of the Christmas story? Christmas is the faith story of a frightened but submissive girl who is willing to be “the Lord’s servant.” It is the account of shepherds bowing reverently to the Good Shepherd of Yahweh’s flock and Magi offering their gifts and homage to the child born to be Israel’s king. It is Joseph, Simeon and Anna, the flight into Egypt, families together, gifts exchanged – it is all these ancient and modern things blended into the wonderful event called Christmas. Above all else, it is the affirmation of God still with us.

In all our times of difficulty, the Lord delivers his people in one way or another. One way may be deliverance in space and time; another may be victory over the sting and power of death. But no one who trusts him will be put to shame.

You cannot have forgotten the horrible event of only four years ago when Pam Am Flight 103 exploded over Scotland. A revolting terrorist attack disintegrated the plane and killed everyone aboard. And it was Christmastime!

When Susan Cohen learned that her only child, Theodora, had been among the victims, she was overwhelmed by grief. On the way to the airport after receiving the news, she twice tried to throw herself from the car onto the highway. She wanted to die. Her husband, Daniel, restrained her and said he could not live without her.

The next wave of anguish struck when the two of them returned to their Port Jervis, New York, home to confront a barren Christmas and Theodora’s room that would always be empty. According to a story in the *New York Times*, it was at that point that something promising happened. Friends, neighbors, and strangers appeared to support the Cohens.

Some of Theodora’s friends, fellow students with her at Syracuse University, slept on the living room floor so the Cohens would not have to be alone. “In the middle of this ghastly evil, there is a beautiful side to people,” said Mrs. Cohen. “And it has come out.”

Yes, in the middle of the first-century church’s “ghastly evil,” the Apocalypse reaffirmed that those saints would not have to be alone. The human writer of the story had earlier presented Jesus as the Eternal Word come in the flesh and “dwelling among us” (John 1:1-14). Now he was being called to offer the same truth to harassed and unhappy people whose lives were falling apart under persecution.

That *God is with us* remains the assurance of scripture this Christmas. Unemployed persons, families in crisis, lives entangled in sin, hearts breaking under a load too great for them – God has come among us to enter your pain, forgive your sin, and empower your existence. That Satan cannot defeat him means that you are assured of victory in your own struggles with evil.

Stand with the Lamb, and, mystery of mysteries, the dragon looking to destroy you is powerless. Stand at the cross, and death is transformed into life. Kneel beside his cradle, and sense that you are not alone.

A Broken Vessel

*by Michelle Morris
November, 1992*

A nearly comatose elderly woman smiles for the first time in months when the red-suited couple walks into the nursing home.

A young girl who still believes in miracles laughs in delight when Mr. and Mrs. Claus arrive on her front porch with Christmas dinner and a doll. The girls' mom cries tears of joy at the anonymous generosity.

More than 10,000 children from all walks of life will find the majog of Christmas in a Winter Wonderland filled with Santa's elves, candy-cane hosues, toy trains, and a giant snowman.

An active boy with a muscular disease calls Santa and asks for an electric wheelchair so he can play with the other children. Friends purchase the wheelchair, and Mr. and Mrs. Claus arrive Christmas Eve to present the shiny, new chariot.

These special dreams all become reality because of two people with little money, lots of faith, and loving hearts: Bill and Audrey Nash.

In the early '70s, Bill drove Audrey to Abilene, Texas with her two teenaged children, never planning to stay "in that podunk town," he rmeembers. he took up temporary residence at an old hotel, got a job, and started attending the Highland Church of Christ with Audrey's family.

Neither Bill nor Audrey thought then they would ever have a place ministering to others. She was divorced. Bill, twice divorced, was a recovering alcoholic struggling with the sins of his past.

"Could God possibly use us?" they asked themselves.

After knowing each other for 30 years, the two were married July 11, 1976 and continued to attend the Highland church.

Then came a call for bus drivers and Bible class teachers. Bill volunteered to drive; Audrey requested the special needs class. Soon Bill was helping her in class because of the difficulties of dealing with a mixture of young people with emotional and behavioral problems, autism, physical handicaps, and mental retardation.

The special needs program grew to more than 40 people with various disabilities.

"For several years I watched Bill interact with others at Highland," says David Wray, elder at the Highland Church of Christ. "He had innate pastoring skills and the ability to minister to people intuitively. He had enormous potential."

Although many people knew Bill, few knew much about his past. The friendly, teddy-bear-like man and his wife were well-respected and known for the way they cared for people less fortunate than themselves. Most church members didn't know of his heartbreak at not seeing the four children from his first marriage grow up. Or the pains of not seeing the two children from his second marriage for 20 years. Or his guilt for having turned away from the church for 13 years while struggling with heavy drinking, depression, and a loss of the Christian faith taught him by his parents.

Most people saw the love in his eyes when he spoke of Audrey without ever realizing he felt she had literally "saved my life and saved my soul."

"Audrey and I met at a church camp when I was almost 13 and she was 14," Bill recalls. "We were camp sweethearts. After one more summer together, we went our separate ways. When our paths finally crossed again more than 20 years later, I knew I should have listened to my 12-year-old heart."

Bill had kept track of Audrey through mutual friends and relatives, including her parents, for whom he had great respect. When he finally decided to "quit drinking or die," he got on a bus and headed to Audrey's parents' home in Canada.

"I got on that bus drunk, probably with another drink in my pocket, and knew that the five-hour ride would give me just enough time to sober up," Bill says. "Audrey met me at 5:30 a.m., and I know I looked bad and smelled bad. We had coffee together, and she dropped me at the YMCA. I soon moved into her parents' home, and I had too much respect for them to drink there. Thanks to God's love, the love of Christians, and a 12-step program, I've been sober ever since."

A broken, humbled Bill Nash began to haunt the back rows of church again. He and Audrey reestablished their old friendship, and they soon made the trip to Abilene that led to their marriage.

One heart-wrenching Sunday night at the Highland church, Bill shared his story. And instead of rejecting him, as he had feared, the church showed him acceptance and love. Suddenly people who had never had the courage to come forward with problems began to call Bill. They began to admit their problems – and they found help and encouragement.

"Without question, Bill opened the way for other people with needs," says friend and Highland member James Hallmark. "Bill started 12-step groups that encourage such qualities as humility, openness, honesty, and acceptance – qualities the church ought to exhibit. If someone is out there with a desperate need, their perception of the church is critical."

Bill doesn't easily take credit for accomplishments.

"God has been able to use me in my brokenness," he says. "And he could not use me until I was broken."

Since that Sunday night, the Highland congregatio has continued to search for ways to meet the needs of people. After serving part-time in maintenance for Highland, the elders asked Bill to serve as the special needs minister, overseeing the programs for the disabled as well as all support groups.

“Recent literature discusses the difference between a fortress church and a marketplace church,” Wray says. “Bill has modeled for us how to go to the marketplace and deal with kingdom issues – not institutional issues.”

Bill and Audrey have developed their own methods for reaching out to the community. Besides their annual visits to the nursing homes and day-care centers as Mr. and Mrs. Claus, they’ve developed a unique way to give children positive memories of Christmas. It’s called Winter Wonderland.

The idea first developed in 1984 as a way to allow the children at Highland to have breakfast with Santa.

“The first year the small room near the kitchen in the church’s family life center seemed impossible to fill,” Audrey recalls with a smile. “We served a full breakfast and gave each child handmade, painted gifts.”

They soon moved to the church’s gym, and later to a large, empty department store. When they first looked at the place, the floor was covered with many colors of paint, only two light bulbs were burning, and the building was a mess. Number one elf and Highland elder Roy Lewis heard of their predicament and volunteered to rewire the building to handle the enormous needs of all the decorations.

Although the Nashes still live in an old hosue in a lower-income neighborhood, they’ve never hesitated to pour their own money into items that would make Winter Wonderland special for the children.

Each year, Audrey has created a theme for the event, such as snowflakes, reindeer, bears, or snowmen. She and Bill travelled to Michigan some years ago to pick up a 25-foot Christmas tree to serve as the centerpeiece for the holiday fantasy land, and they would decorate it with thousands of ornaments and lights.

“They just think the kids are the greatest in the world,” Lewis said. “They’ll knock themselves out for the kdis. I would leave at 11 p.m. and say, ‘Audrey, go on home.’ At 2 a.m., she’d still be there, making everything perfect, and they’d both be back up at 6 or 7 to start up again.”

Bill and Audrey stress that Winter Wonderland is a family, church, and community effort involving thousands of volunteer hours. Their daughter, artist Debbie Rhodes, hand-painted intricate winter scenes on windows and walls throughout the huge building.

For three weeks in December 1991, thousands of children from the community watched mechanical elves make toys, talked with Snow White, enjoyed storytelling and snow-filled

murals, hugged Frosty the Snowman and a fuzzy bear, saw hundreds of handmade snowflakes hanging from the ceiling, and told Santa what they wanted for Christmas.

“I grew up with little money in a middle-class, blue-collar family in Detroit, but I don’t remember a time I didn’t get what I wanted for Christmas,” Bill said. “I remember our annual trips to the huge J.L. Hudson department store. The day after Thanksgiving, they would put up a gigantic toy display and hundreds of decorations. Kids, rich and poor, would wander around the place together, with no differences. I have wonderful memories of those visits.”

Bill said those memories sparked in him a desire to give other children “better Christmas memories than the reality of their daily lives.”

Unfortunately, Bill and Audrey will be unable to create Winter Wonderland this year. Audrey recalled the stories about Bill and his Christmas magic from her hospital bed, only a few days after being diagnosed with cancer that has spread to several vital organs. She planned to begin chemotherapy because, Bill said, “she’s living with cancer, not dying of it.”

Despite their smiles as they recall fond memories, tears shine in his eyes as Bill talks about Audrey’s part in all their activities.

“She’s the heart,” he said. “I’m just the hand.”

Bill looks forward to next year’s Winter Wonderland, adding, “Next year will be bigger and better than ever.”

Most of all, he looks forward to once again watching Audrey’s eyes light up at the thought of using all her creativity to bring a little happiness to lots of children.

“We’re so much a team,” Bill says. “I read Proverbs 31 and think ‘That guy is almost as lucky as me.’ “

Wrestling With Division: Historical Efforts at Christian Unity

by Douglas A. Foster
November, 1992

*The union of Christians is the will of God, the prayer of Jesus, and the means of bringing the world to believe in Jesus, therefore it must be right. That man is then engaged in a righteous work, who labors to promote this union, by removing every obstruction to it ... But the man who acts a contrary part must be wrong, and engaged in a work in opposition to the will of God, the prayer of Jesus, and the salvation of the world. (Barton W. Stone, **Christian Messenger**, 1827.)*

If Jesus' words in John 17 are to be taken seriously, he considered the unity of his followers to be of greatest importance. It was the most pressing thing on Jesus' mind as he was about to be crucified. From the factions in the Jerusalem and Corinthian churches to the fragmentation in the Christian world today, Christian women and men have struggled with how to fulfill that anguished prayer for oneness.

Every century has its own painful stories of division among those claiming to follow Christ. Yet perhaps no era is more filled with the agony of separation and bitterness than that of the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. Reformers like Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, and Blathasar Hubmaier began to address legitimate grievances against established religious authority. Within a few decades Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Reformed, and Anabaptists had forged their own enclaves, battling each other and refusing to recognize any but their own group as Christians.

Some religious leaders of the day, however, did try to eliminate the strife and division. The fragmentation that resulted from the Reformation especially disturbed Philipp Melanchthon, Martin Luther's right-hand man. Shortly after Luther's death in 1546 a dispute arose concerning whether Lutherans could agree to a statement of belief "giving in" to Roman Catholic doctrines like the veneration of the saints, confirmation, and extreme unction (last rites).

Melanchthon insisted that Christians must make a distinction between beliefs and practices essential to the gospel and those that were important but not part of the core. He called the second group *adiaphora*, a Greek word meaning non-essentials. In times of tension and division among Christians, he insisted, they could compromise on *adiaphora* for the sake of unity and for the opportunity to continue to preach the essentials.

Another Lutheran who worked to reconcile Reformation factions, this time in the seventeenth century, was Georg Calixtus. Though convinced that Lutheranism represented the best understanding of Scripture, Calixtus insisted that such a view did not make all other Christians heretics or apostates. In language similar to Melanchthon's, he distinguished between heresy and error. Heresy is the denial of something essential for salvation, he explained, while error is denial of a lesser part of revelation. Only heresy could rightly divide Christians.

The problem, of course, arises when one tries to specify the essentials. Calixtus contended that Scripture was the source of all true Christian belief, but that the things believed “everywhere, always and by all” in the first five centuries of the church comprised the core doctrines and thus defined heresy. Surely everything essential to salvation would have been present in the first five centuries, he reasoned. Otherwise no one in the early period of the church could have been saved. Calixtus’ ideas were largely opposed in his day. Yet today many regard him as a forerunner of modern efforts at Christian unity.

In the eighteenth century another important voice for Christian unity was Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf. This extremely devout man was a “pietist,” part of a movement seeking to bring life to what many regarded as dead orthodoxy in the European churches. Zinzendorf defined the Christian essentials as believing in the power of Jesus’ blood and trusting in his merits. He became leader of a religious community which later became the Moravian Church or Church of the Brethren. Zinzendorf did not see the group as separate from other Christians. He devoted his life to bringing Christians together in the work of taking the gospel to the whole world.

Perhaps the most famous unit advocates of the nineteenth century were two Americans, Thomas Campbell of the seceder Church of Scotland, and Barton W. Stone of the Presbyterian Church in the United States. In 1809, after his denomination expelled him for serving communion to people in other groups and objecting to credal subscription, Campbell and several friends in western Pennsylvania formed a society they called the Christian Association. In Campbell’s booklet *The Declaration and Address of the Christian Association of Washington, Pennsylvania*, he explained the group’s purpose to the public – to promote Christian unity in this new land.

Campbell called for Christians in all denominations to unite with them “in the common cause of simple evangelical Christianity.” He went on to say that “nothing ought to be inculcated upon Christians as articles of faith, nor required of them as terms of communion, but what is expressly taught and enjoined upon them in the Word of God.” Furthermore, Campbell insisted, it was not necessary that persons have a knowledge of all divine truth to be entitled to a place in the church. All that was necessary was a knowledge of their sinful condition and the way of salvation through Christ. Anyone who made a profession of faith in Christ and showed the reality of his or her faith by appropriate actions should be considered a precious saint of God and loved as a child of the Father.

Barton W. Stone was so convinced of the necessity of Christian Unity that he and five other ministers dissolved their Presbyterian organization in 1804 to “sink into union with the body of Christ at large.”

Stone was totally devoted to the ideal of unity, but he was also a realist. He knew that even doctrinal agreement would not unite people who did not want unity. In August 1835 Stone published in his paper the *Christian Messenger* a short article which summed up his attitude.

The scriptures will never keep together in union and fellowship members not in the spirit of the scriptures, which spirit is love, peace, unity, forbearance, and cheerful obedience. This is the spirit of the great Head of the body. I blush for my fellows, who hold up the Bible as the bond of union yet make their opinions of it tests of fellowship; who plead for union of all Christians; yet

refuse fellowship with such as dissent from their notions ... Such anti-sectarian-sectarians are doing more mischief to the cause, and advancement of truth, the unity of Christians, and the salvation of the world than all the skeptics in the world. In fact, they create skeptics.

Many others in Christian history have seen the evils of division and struggled to bring the unity of Christ's followers that would cause the world to believe. The work must continue, for so far we have failed.

For further reading:

Young, Charles Alexander, ed. *Historical Documents Advocating Christian Union*. Reprinted by College Press, 1985. (1-800-289-3300). Campbell's "Declaration and Address" and Stone's "Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery" among others.

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Material on Melancthon, Calixtus, and Zinzendorf can be found in church histories such as Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 2 vols. harper & Row, 1984.

A Christmas Fable

by Thom Lemmons
November, 1992

Sarah leaned wearily against the glass doors of Sears and Roebuck. The small, generic vestibule smelled damp and musty, perfumed by the fatigue and frantic urgency of the shoppers rushing to complete their holiday missions. Inside the store, the Muzak system was gently exuding the strains of “Silent Night” onto the heedless heads of the scurrying hordes below.

As she stared around for a moment, orienting herself and remembering what she had come for, Sarah found herself absently humming the refrain to the carol: “sleep in heavenly peace” Sleep. That sounded pretty good right now. But she had no time for slumber. Too many things to do.

Jack had insisted it wasn’t necessary to buy him anything, but she was too adept at reading between the lines to accept his generosity at face value. He would be hurt if he didn’t have a present under the tree, just as much as the kids would be. Oh, he wouldn’t say anything but he would find a way to let her know. It wasn’t worth the silent price she would have to pay, Sarah decided. Jack would get his present, too.

As she shouldered her way through the crowd toward the men’s department, she ticked off in her mind, for the hundredth time ... The List. Each Christmas season, Sarah became intimate with The List for several weeks, each morning and evening keeping a running tally of her progress through its obstacles. She was nearly finished; the goal lay at hand. With the trophy she was about to wrest from the frantic scrabbling in Sears’ men’s department, she would complete the gauntlet. Everything would be bought, all the bases covered. her family would be happy. And that was her goal, after all: to keep everyone happy. Besides, wasn’t this supposed to be the season of Good Cheer? There would be Good Cheer at her house, capital letters and all, or she would know the reason why.

She selected a suitably fashionable sweater from the rack, noting almost subconsciously which of Jack’s slacks were of co-ordinate colors, which shirts would be appropriate. Gaining momentum, she homed in on the trouser section, wresting from the serpentine tangle of hangers, display stands, and other shoppers’ hands a pair of khaki slacks in the style she had heard Jack mention – oh, so casually – that he liked. On a whim, she plucked from a display a brace of pairs of socks displaying a mildly chaotic color scheme, then hustled over to settle in to the three-person-deep queue in front of the cash register. Tucking her selections under one arm, she began fishing about in her purse for a suitable piece of plastic to hand to the clerk.

Eventually, Sarah fought her way from the cash register and the harried, desperate looks of the sales clerks. She headed toward the aisle leading to the door. The muzak was now oozing “Mary Had a Boy-Child.” Images of that first Christmas flitted through Sarah’s mind. A tiny corner of her consciousness wistfully considered that ancient, simpler time: no shopping lists, no crowds,

no hurry-and-scurry, no MasterCard; only a stable, a husband, and a baby. Slowly, her mind began to unfurl, began to gently relax along the soft contours of a night in Judea, the lilting lines of a song which might have been sung by angels

... And then a shopping cart crashed into her left side, knocking her packages from her arms. "Oh, I'm so sorry," the cart's driver said quickly, "I was in such a hurry and I was looking down at my list, and I guess I just didn't ..."

By the time the offender had gotten that far, Sarah had regathered her wares, glared at the heedless list-reader, and stalked off toward the exit. "Boy," she grouched to herself, "some people have about as much couth as Attila the Hun."

She finally made it to her car and stowed the package, gift-wrapped by the store for only 50 cents extra, atop the pile of joy stacked in the back seat. She leaned back in the driver's seat and took one long, relieved breath, then, two, then three. Finished. The List was complete. Now all she had to do was get home through the frozen-molasses traffic creeping along the wet streets in the gray, misty December morning.

She started the engine, then snapped on the radio. As she flipped quickly through the dial, she paused to listen for a moment to the local Christian station. They were broadcasting a message sponsored by one of the local churches, urging everyone to remember "The Reason for the Season." Cute slogan, she thought absently. "Nothing on I really want to listen to," she decided. Switching off the radio, she put the car in gear and eased out into the mall parking lot, headed toward the nearest exit.

Driving home, she ticked off in her mind the itinerary for the evening. The baby-sitter was lined up, she had RSVP'd the Nelsons for the party, her dress was dry-cleaned (Jack was supposed to pick it up on his way home – she hoped he remembered) . All set. And then, with a flash of horror, she suddenly realized she had forgotten to thaw the popcorn shrimp for the dip she was supposed to take. Emergency plans ran helter-skelter through her mind as she searched for a way to salvage her breach of memory. She couldn't show up at the Nelson's without her dip; it would be too embarrassing! She had to get home immediately – she had to figure out what to do!

Suddenly each car in her path became an opponent to be bested, each yellow traffic signal an exhortation to speed, each red signal a curse of fate. She muttered irritably, she changed lanes for the slightest advantage, she drummed her hands impatiently on the steering wheel. "Come on, come on, come on!" she chanted impatiently at the traffic, the traffic lights, the circumstances, and herself.

At last, she squealed into the driveway. She bolted from the car almost before it stopped, slamming doors and yanking packages out of the back seat as though someone had declared a National Emergency. Rushing in the house and dropping the sacks onto the couch, she raced to the fridge and searched avidly for something she could throw together in 15 minutes or less; something to help keep the schedule on track. The schedule had so little room for error.

She heard a car door slam, then moments later Jack came into the house, whistling “Away in a Manger.” He walked cheerily into the kitchen, leaned over and kissed her on the back of the neck. “Hey, babe. How’s your day been?” Surely an innocent question.

She wheeled on him, a bright gleam of desperation in her eyes. “Jack, could you please go get the kids from day care? I remembered on the way home I hadn’t thawed the shrimp for the dip for tonight, and I’ve got to put something together real quick so I can get dressed and ready to go and I won’t have time to do this and pick them up too. hang my dress on the back of our bedroom door and” She paused, as Jack grimaced and smacked his forehead with the heel of his hand.

“I can’t believe it ... Sarah, I forgot to go by the dry cleaners!”

“Jack, I told you”

“Yes, I know you did ... Look, I’m really sorry.” There was an uncomfortable, angry silence as each of them considered an array of less-than-optimum choices. “Look ... I know what,” Jack said finally, “I’ll go get the kids and run by the cleaner’s and be back here in” He studied his watch a moment, mentally calculating the length of time needed to complete the route, “... in 20 minutes. You do your thing, and I’ll handle everything else.”

Spinning on his heel, he abandoned the field, strategically retreating toward the front door. Sarah stared angrily after him until she heard the front door slam, followed by his quick footsteps up the sidewalk. The car ground into life, and Jack’s tires squealed as he backed hurriedly out of the driveway. Sighing a sigh of deep exasperation, she jerked a cookbook from the shelf and carried it to the table, thumbing through it until she arrived at the “Dips” section. Staring dully at the index, she contemplated the greatly narrowed range of options remaining to her.

Sitting at the kitchen table, a sinking, sick feeling settled into the pit of Sarah’s stomach. Unraveled – it was all coming unraveled. She had planned, predicted, thought ahead, prepared for this day and the days preceding and following it. She had been determined to keep it all together, and still it was coming apart on her. The tears began to seep from her eyes as she sat, slowly but surely losing the skirmish with despair. Fatigue and despair, always close allies, seemed almost omnipotent during this time of the year. “Why should that be?” she thought. “Isn’t this supposed to be the season of Good Cheer?”

They had forgotten, she told herself wearily. That was all there was to it, they had forgotten, and that was the cause of the problem, the frustration. Getting up from the table, she sniffed and wiped her nose with the back of her hand as she reluctantly faced the fridge. Depressed by the silence of the house, she switched on the radio over the sink. “O, little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie ...”

She wondered if they had forgotten anything else. Forgetting suddenly seemed so easy. Still sniffing, she tugged open the refrigerator door.

Movie Review: *Sister Act* – A Comedy Critiques the Church

Reviewed by Dan Rhodes
November, 1992

The plot is predictable. The acting is adequate. But into this rather flimsy framework is woven a story of acceptance, change, and growth – a story of a church in transition. From Touchstone Pictures and based on a screenplay by Joseph Howard, *Sister Act* is a Scott Rudin production created by Walt Disney Pictures and distributed by Buena Vista.

A surprise box office hit, *Sister Act* (rated PG) remained in the top 10 through the entire summer and by mid-September had grossed in excess of \$126 million. Repeat viewers and word of mouth have accelerated the release of this film on video. Available November 13, 1992 from Touchstone Home Video, anticipated volume has prompted the direct sell price of \$19.95.

For churches in danger of polarization, *Sister Act* may offer not only comic relief but an enduring story which calls us to critique our purpose, attitudes, and methods.

Sister Act features one major star, Whoopi Goldberg. She portrays a Diana Ross wannabe, Deloris Van Carrier, the lead singer for a group performing in a second-rate lounge in Reno. Amidst the background music of shuffling cards, roulette wheels, and slot machines, the Ronelles attempt to preserve the sounds of the '60s, a la the Supremes.

Having been warned as a child in Catholic school how such a girl might turn out, Deloris fulfills those negative expectations with all the attendant matters of lifestyle. She is involved with the owner of the lounge, Vince La Rocca, portrayed by Harvey Keitel. Vince is a typical mafia-type crime figure. He proclaims his love for Deloris and lavishes her with gifts. She becomes frustrated, however, when after going to confession, Vince decides he will not divorce his wife.

Accidentally witnessing an underling executed at Vince's order, Deloris flees to the police. With her testimony Vince finally can be put away permanently, if she can be kept alive for two months until the trial. Playing a totally serious character and straight man in this comedy, Bill Nunn as Sergeant Eddie Souther, convinces Deloris to enter the police witness protection program. She must go underground.

The setting now shifts to San Francisco and the least likely place Vince would ever look for Deloris: St. Katherine's Convent. Historically, convents have been regarded as places of refuge, providing comfort and asylum for people in trouble. These same convents can provide the perfect ambience for a great comic premise. Director Emile Ardolino saw the humor of the situation and more: "A brassy, streetwise, lusty loung singer, in short, the opposite of a nun, is forced to hide in a convent to protect herself from gangsters. The surprise for the characters is that she finds friendship, love, and her own self-worth in a place she least expects it." According to Ms. Goldberg, that was one reason she was attracted to the project. "The story is about self-discovery, and discovering that when you're open to receiving help, it comes to you. Deloris thinks her life is all right, until she is forced to spend time learning what right really is."

St. Katherine's stands as only a faint flicker of light in a run-down, seedy part of the city. Nuns are cloistered behind graffiti-covered walls while across the street and down the block are countless lives plagued with sickness, sorrow, and sin. Portrayed by veteran Maggie Smith, the imperious Mother Superior administers what Deloris thinks is more of a reformatory than a sanctuary. By her own admission a "relic," the Reverend Mother has retreated from time, representing a form of religion that is strict and narrow, traditional and dead.

The convent is attached to a cathedral which is quite large and quite empty of worshippers. The services are predictable and boring and at least would be conducive for sleepign except for the choir which sings too loud, off key and with little regard for tempo. However, it is through the choir and its transformation that the message of the movie is conveyed.

A reluctant and unwilling candidate, Deloris tries to take her place with the nuns. She is now Sister Mary Clarence, purportedly transferred from a more progressive convent. Not finding her ministry in any other capacity, she is forced to join the choir and subsequently becomes the director. Throughout her stay in the convent and especially in her work with the choir, Deloris/Mary Clarence interacts primarily with a troika of women, bringing a definite ensemble feeling to the story. However, the characters of Sister Mary Robert (Wendy Makkena), Sister Mary Patrick (Kathy Najimny), and Sister Mary Lazarus (Mary Wickes) stand alone as strongly-defined individuals.

Mary Clarence correctly assesses that the nuns' tasks are predominantly self-serving busy work. Mary Robert so desperately wants to reach out in a ministry that is her very own. She represents a theme underlying the convent's awakening: ministry should be enjoyable and based on one's gifts. The choir members are reminded to rejoice since they are singing to the Lord!

With some remedial musical instruction, more adept leadership, increased practice time and expansion of the repertoire to include more modern songs, Mary Clarence transforms the choir into a class act. Whoopi Goldberg and the supporting cast of choir nuns perform original interpretations of several Motown classics. These songs of the '60s are given new words and sung with feeling, meaning, and reverence. "My Guy" becomes "My God" – "nothing you could say could tear me away from My God. Nothing you could do could make me be untrue to my God." "I will follow him" is directed to Jesus.

Hymns are sung well both traditionally and with an upbeat flair. The peak of impact occurs when the traditional version is followed by a rhythm and blues rendition of the classic Catholic hymn, "Hail Holy Queen." The choir's new music and the new style of performance generates vibrancy and leads to other positive changes. Everyone is impressed and supportive. Almost.

The Mother Superior is aghast at such "secular" display. But the music heard outside creates interest and attracts the youth back to church. Even older people who had been turned off to church return as willing worshippers, praising God. The ministry goes outside the church, not only singing on the streets, but serving the community.

The church discovers that the way to inward renewal is through outward service. The nuns set out to renew the neighborhood. Part of the convent fence is removed to make way for a

playground. A day-care center and a food kitchen for the homeless are opened. The nuns take a stand against pornography. Most significantly, however, they meet people and interact with them. Relationships are developed, especially with teens.

The storyline reaches its climax and resolution back in Reno, as Vince learns through a police department leak where Deloris is hiding. In the meantime the Mother Superior, unable to thwart progress but unwilling to change, decides to resign, saying she is “obsolete.” Through a ploy where she is credited with the recent success of the convent, she stays. The crucial point, a line delivered by Sister Mary Clarence, leads to her growth and acceptance: “People don’t have to stay obsolete.”

Fear and ignorance lead to protectionism, and protectionism thwarts growth. What happened to the Mother Superior in *Sister Act* happens to individuals, churches, and religious movements. The film exposes the myths of “disagreement implies dislike” and “differences indicate someone should leave.” For a heritage which stresses autonomy, with the leadership of progressive persons, individual congregations can reverse trends, becoming more able communicators of the grace of God.

Among a plethora of Hollywood productions that you would take neither your kids nor your parents to see, it is refreshing to find a film receiving such accolades as “good clean fun for the whole family” (*The Home Show*).

Beyond the entertainment and suitability factors, it is amazing that through this medium more Christians will be challenged to examine their own idiosyncratic practices than through numerous sermons, seminars, and journal articles. Albeit, the value of *Sister Act* is multiplied as it precipitates discussions of church policies, biblical interpretation, and honest exchange of feelings. An able facilitator with an appropriate discussion guide could utilize *Sister Act* as a focal point in an intergenerational sharing experience, bridging gaps, decreasing fear, and promoting understanding and trust.

For churches in transition, discerning what to hold on to and what to let go of, wanting the church of Jesus Christ to be a vital reality in the 21st century, *Sister Act* will offer humorous and meaningful support. For those who are fearful and retreating, who for their own comfort level insist that the church, and especially its outward forms, be locked into a particular time period (circa 1950), the movie may be seen as irreverent and frivolous, or as “their” situation. Hopefully, for all, *Sister Act* will prove challenging, promote thinking, engender renewed Bible study, and encourage dialogue.

Hope Network Newsletter: Weird is Relative

*by Ron Carlson, Guest Writer (introduction by Lynn Anderson)
November, 1992*

The following story struck a nerve in me that needed striking. So I persuaded the man who lived and wrote the story, Ron Carlson, to pass it on to the *Wineskins* readers through my *Hope Network Newsletter*. Although these stirring lines are convicting, they also ring with hope! Besides, they will introduce you to a refreshing and gifted writer.

His daddy was crippled from the Korean War. His mama never saw 40. They were burned to death in a trailer house fire. Mike somehow escaped the tragedy, but he was on his own at 16, a tragedy waiting to happen. He is 40 now; his mama would be proud.

He has been an alcoholic and a drug addict. The railroad canned him a decade ago because he was trouble ... born on the wrong side of the tracks. he spent the '80s in Lake Tahoe working the strip and following Satan's orders. he peddled cocaine for sport and profit, lived on the edge, often dangling precariously from a broken branch above the fiery pit. He never married. A street-wise Irish Setter was his only steady companion.

He called me several years ago. He was off the cocaine, on the lam, lonesome, and weary. He said he loved me, that he missed his old buddy. I knew he meant it. We were best friends. Old relationships seldom die. They crack and break, but usually the pieces can be restored.

I had left his seamy world in 1980 to follow Jesus. He had really called to find out how the religious experiment was working. I told him, "Swell." he was surprised. I wasn't.

He called again a few months ago. He had moved to Seattle, found an honest job, rented an apartment, inherited a cat; his conversation made sense.

Perhaps it was more than coincidence that I was in Seattle recently for the Great Northwest Evangelism Workshop. I snuck away from the brethren early to spend the weekend with my old friend. Sometimes a Christian has to take leave of the safety of the brethren to see what the pagan competition is up to. I call it market research, and I am always a little surprised to rediscover the turmoil of life in the trenches without God. It's not too pretty.

I spent Saturday afternoon listening to Mike scold his niece about the evils of drugs and casual sex. He later confided to me that she would like him to butt out of her life and let her make her own mistakes ... just like he had the freedom to do. His pain at the response was obvious and his appreciation of freedom tainted.

Later in the afternoon he persuaded me to muster enough courage to visit his brother. This was no small decision. His brother lived in a crummy little apartment on Capital Hill among the punks, homeless, drag queens, contemporary lepers and other world-class wurdos. It was not a fun place, good place, or safe place. It was basically an awful place. Sirens. Stench. Trash.

Decay. Poverty. Hoplessness. Intoxication. Death. Satan's calling card was everywhere. This was his turf. Gangs of devils were on every corner sporting his colors, looking for a fight.

"Caution, you who enter here!" One may survive to get back out, but one can't remain unpolluted from the journey.

Mike's brother is dying of AIDS. he got it the old-fashioned way ... he earned it. No victim here, just a committed homosexual.

He was too weak to open the door. We found him huddled in a corner curled up in a semi-fetal position, attempting to light another cigarette. The flicker of the match was the only light in a room.

Mike turned on a lamp and his brother's slight shadow was cast on the wall. A 90-pound body doesn't take up much wall space. He looked like death. White as a ghost. All I could notice were his eyes. They were huge and black and haunting, much like those I'd seen in photographs of the concentration camps a half-century ago. I felt like I had invaded a mole's den. I somehow expected to see Gollum appear at any moment with Bilbo Baggins not far behind. I swallowed hard and breathed deep to keep the vomit down.

I averted my eyes from the zombie's stare and scanned the cave. Bottles and bottles of medicine were everywhere, an empty tribute to man's genius in the face of impending death. On the wall by the door hung a cheap frame containing an obnoxious fluorescent bumper sticker: "Life's a Bitch, Then You Die."

We had stopped and bought him some chocolate ice cream. Everybody likes chocolate ice cream. He didn't want any.

"Who's that with you?" he asked Mike irritably.

"It's Ron Carlson. Do you remember him? It's probably been 20 years since you've seen him"

There was a pause. "Yeah ... yeah, I remember him."

There was another pause. He looked my way. "Where do you live, Ron?"

"Dallas," I meekly responded.

"The Big D?" His voice raised with the first hint of interest. "That's where I got this x@# disease."

More silence from everyone.

"Don you go to Father McGee's church?" he asked expectantly. "it's St. Francis up on Walnut Hill. I love Father McGee. Do you know that he is going to get my ashes? He's going to sprinkle

them over White Rock Lake. Have you ever heard about the Lady of the Lake? Well, I'm going to join her soon and we're going to terrorize Dallas together!"

He seemed pleased by the prospect.

We stayed a little longer and chatted. I was sick to my stomach. All the talk of death and ghost stories was unsettling. In contrast, Mike seemed unaffected, as if it was standard procedure.

In the hallway outside the apartment, Mike stopped and visited with other inhabitants of the AIDS colony. He was at ease, while I was as nervous as a cat on a hot tin Texas roof. I wanted out of the building and back to the safety of my rent-a-car and freeway motel. The people looked hideous. They smelled funny. They talked strangely. They acted like they were on drugs. I finally pulled Mike from the building and his ministry and we sped off and out of Capital Hill ... much to my relief.

Back at his apartment we talked late into the night about life. He was looking for some new skills to help process the craziness of his world. We discussed the Lord at some length. He was receptive; so much so that he volunteered to go to church with me the next morning.

As God promised Noah, morning appeared, and although hesitant, Mike put on his best Dockers and we drove down the street to the church building. He was scared, and he wanted to back out, but I wouldn't let him. Beads of sweat spotted his brow. He caught his breath and burst out in confession: "Ron, I haven't been to church in 23 years!"

He fidgeted anxiously for a moment and continued. "What do I do I can't pray. I can't sing. I can't kneel. I don't know anybody. I don't belong with these people."

Suddenly the craziness of the whole event struck me. The same fears and emotions that had encircled me the day before on Capital Hill were now directly transferred to my old friend as we circled the parking lot. As I gazed out the window I saw church people everywhere, dressed in their Sunday best, replet with big smiles and demonstrative displays of *phileo*. Mike was scared of my brethren. In his eyes these were the enemies ... strange creatures from an alien world. The tables had turned. Elders were like the punks, deacons were like the homeless, preachers took the role of the lepers, and at this point, I may as well have had AIDS as far as he was concerned.

I had to laugh.

Then I cried.

Then we went to church.

There is a moral to this story: Weird is relative.

How do we share Jesus with the legion of "weirdos" and castoffs that pound the hot pavement of our cities? I do not have any of the answers, but this I now know. They ain't going to come to us 'cause we talk funny, hug funny, smile funny, think funny, and live funny.

Who among us has the heart and compassion to enter their world? Who is willing to eat with the prostitutes and tax collectors? Who is willing to dispense the balm in Gilead? As purveyors of hope, physicians to the ill, merchants of mercy, and disciples of Jesus, how long will we tarry in our ivory towers? There can be no Christian impact without contact. Isolated piety doesn't win souls.

The darkness of the pagan realm is great. But the light of the world is greater. "You may be blameless and genuine, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life ..." (Philippians 2:15,16). The world is wicked and estranged from the Creator, but we who are reconciled are first and foremost ministers of reconciliation, and it is our mission to bring the good news of peace to the Nineveh of our generation.

The urgent call to ministry in the trenches is clarion. Christianity must hit the streets. We must roll up our sleeves, clad ourselves in the armor of God, and enter the turf of our adversary. Of course it comes with a risk, but show me where Jesus ever said that the Christian way of life was risk-free. Had it been, he would have stayed in heaven, and we would all be lost in the muck and mire of our sins, a fate far worse than AIDS.

Although our ministerial history in regard to valuing the weird has been anything but dynamic and effective, there are presently numerous urban ministries emerging and evolving across the land that promise a brighter tomorrow. A new openness fostered among many churches has permitted uniquely gifted Christians to leave the safety and sanctity of our strategically located fortresses in exchange for the fallen neighborhoods of inner-city chaos. These new foot soldiers, often unorthodox by traditional standards, are dedicated to reclaiming our cities for God, and to do so, they have taken the gospel to the streets. With hearts full of compassion and mercy, they have chosen to take Christ to the lost rather than waiting for the lost to trample down our doors. And it's working!

Dallas, like every city in America, has its own version of Capital Hill. Even smaller cities need to address the plight of the downtrodden. Ministry to the poor and poor in spirit needs to happen in every community. In an attempt to neutralize Satan's influence in the heart of Dallas, the Central Dallas Food Pantry was born in humble beginnings about four years ago. Joe Roberts, an ex-biker turned disciple, was hired to operate the ministry, and he has had much success in ministering to thousands during this time.

Today, the Food Pantry shares space with the newly-formed Central Dallas Church of Christ, an evangelistic effort designed to penetrate Satan's strong-hold and reclaim the turf for Jesus. Carey Dowl, assisted by Santiago Pinon (a second-year student at the Center for Christian Education), are active on the streets of Central Dallas preaching the gospel of peace to the mass of disenfranchised folks in the area. Ten people have been baptized in the last couple of months. Classes entitled "Life Skills" are helping people acquire the tools necessary to compete in the "real world." Love, hope, mercy, and faith are being dispensed in quantity. Progress is evident. Victories are just over the next hill.

Thanks, Ron, for this brief but compelling glimpse into downtown reality ... and for the hope!

Besides the encouraging word from Central Dallas, points of light pierce the urban darkness of a number of other cities as well. If God has burdened your heart for the inner city you may want to find out more about these. To mention just a few:

Houston

The Impact Church of Christ, planted by Charlie Middlebrook,
2420 Washington Avenue,
Houston, TX 77007
telephone 713-864-5667

San Francisco

The Metropolitan Church of Christ, led by Kinwood Devore,
315 Rolph Street,
San Francisco, CA 94112
telephone 415-359-9836.

Dallas

The Central Dallas Church of Christ, led by Carey Dowl
801 N. Peak Avenue,
Dallas, TX 75246
telephone 214-826-9535.

Nashville

Inner City Ministries, led by Lytle Thomas
185 Wharf Avenue,
Nashville, TN 37210
telephone 615-255-1726.

North Little Rock

The Levy Church of Christ,
5124 Camp Robinson Road,
North Little Rock, AR 72118
telephone 501-753-4860 – oversees an inner city work led by Gary Neal.

Memphis

The Highland Street Church of Christ
443 South Highland,
Memphis, TN 38111
telephone 901-458-3335 – is beginning an inner city ministry with Anthony Wood serving as minister.

And there are others. Perhaps God will ignite the next grass fire of our movement in the inner city. Indeed, as Harold Shank says, “The next revival may well be among the poor.”

For news about what is happening in the Christian world at large, get on the mailing list of International Urban Associates (IUA), 1043 W. Madison Street, Suite 200, Chicago, IL 60607. Their newsletter is published by Ray Bakke, author of *The Urban Christian*.

AfterGlow: The Irrational Season

Phillip Morrison
November, 1992

For a long time I have been fascinated by Madeleine L'Engle's little verse:

This is the irrational season
When love blooms bright and wild,
Had Mary been filled with reason
There'd have been no room for the child.

There isn't much about the birth of Jesus that fits into neat, rational categories. For Mary to have laughed at the very thought of giving birth to the Savior would be perfectly understandable. A virgin birth, a king born in a stable, God come to earth to live as a man, glorious announcement by heavenly hosts – none of it seems to make sense.

Not until I remember Robert McAfee Brown's description of Jesus as "the center of sanity in a crazy world." What doesn't make much sense at the beginning ultimately becomes the only thing that does make sense.

The teachers of the law in Jerusalem were not prepared for a 12-year-old boy to astound them with his wisdom. And every generation since – including ours – has shared their astonishment. His life was full of incredible deeds, and teachings that conflicted with the conventional wisdom.

Least of all did his death make sense. At the height of his popularity, with the full power of God at his command, he willingly laid down his life.

Helmut Thielicke pointed out that in Jesus' crib and cross we have the most extreme points in a life. We all experience birth and death, but he alone went from the cradle to the cross.

Thielicke also wrestled with the irrationality of Jesus' story: "A Son of God who defends his title with the arguments that he is the brother of even the poorest and the guilty and takes their burden upon himself: this is a fact one can only note, and shake one's head in unbelief – or one must worship and adore. There is no other alternative. I must worship.

"That's why I celebrate Christmas."

Henry Van Dyke's classic essay raises a series of provocative questions and reaches a similar conclusion: "Are you willing to forget what you have done for others, and remember what others have done for you; ... to see that your fellow men are just as real as you are, and try to look beyond their faces to their hearts, hungry for joy; ... to close your book of complaints against the management of the universe, and look around you for a place where you can sow a few seeds of happiness? Are you willing to stoop down and consider the needs and desires of the little children; to remember the weakness and loneliness of people who are growing old; to stop

asking how much your friends love you, and ask yourself whether you love them enough; to bear in mind the things that other people have to bear on their hearts; ... to make a grave for your ugly thoughts and a garden for your kindly feelings, and keep the gate open – are you willing to do these things even for a day? Then you can keep Christmas.”

Again this year, I can ... I will ... I must celebrate Christmas.