

Wineskins Magazine

Faces of Poverty

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Face By Face

by Mike Cope

November – December, 1993

Christians could ignore poverty and homelessness if it weren't for one thing: faces. Faces full of wrinkles or freckles or despair or hope.

Like the face of 43-year-old Yetta Adams, a homeless woman whose death last Thanksgiving jerked a nation of people out of its post-turkey overdoes. Many homeless people die alone on a bench. That's not enough to qualify as "news." But this woman had the indelicate nerve to die on a bench in front of the Housing and Urban Development headquarters in Washington. HUD is the agency assigned the task of finding solutions to the homeless crisis. Whatever ideas Henry Cisneros and his agency surface will be too late for her.

Or the face of a seven-year-old child from an impoverished family in Abilene, Texas, who last december won a \$25 shopping spree certificate from the Jaycees and who, when asked what she wanted, said she'd like mittens for yer young brothers, a t-shirt for her older brother, and a t-shirt for her dad.

Or the face of LaJoe Rivers, a young single mother trying to raise her children in the drug-saturated Henry Horner Homes project in Chicago. When Alex Kotlowitz raised the possibility of writing a book about her children and other children in the housing project, she replied, "But you know, there are no children here. They've seen too much to be children."

I'm bad about ignoring faces. When I walk through a crowd, my mind tends to be elsewhere. I notice bodies rather than faces. But I have a feeling that Jesus of Nazareth saw faces. he saw the swollen eyes, the weathered lines, the ornery smirks. Through faces, he worked out his mission call: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18).

A few years ago I got to visit for about an hour with Tony Campolo, a Christian sociologist who teaches at Eastern College, in his office. After he described the difficulty every restoration group has maintaining forward motion, I asked him how a stagnant movement (there's a good oxymoron!) can regain its momentum. Would it take healthier teaching? renewal in worship? vision by leaders?

"No, no, no," he yelled. (I couldn't ever tell that he is able to distinguish between an audience of 10,000 and an audience of one!) "Renewal comes by helping your people minister to the poorest of the poor. There they will see the face of Jesus. And that's what restoration is all about."

This issue of *Wineskins* doesn't have an answer to poverty and homelessness. But it does offer a few modest suggestions. It doesn't chronicle all the faces of suffering. But it portrays a few of them.

A church that wants to follow the eternal heart of God must cross some avenues, enter some housing projects, and peek down into some ditches. A church that wants to carry on the mission of Jesus must feed, teach, clothe, and care. One by one. Face by face.

God's Dirty Hands

by Rubel Shelly

November – December, 1993

The gods of Babylon, Greece, and Rome were remote from Planet Earth, detached from humanity, and generally unmoved by the human condition. More than that, these “gods” were seen as being reduced and defiled by contact with matter.

Their presence was most often sensed in the context of major disasters. Then their devotee's primary role was to placate and pacify them with ritual and ceremony. If one of them ever appeared in human form, he was a Superman-type hero who was immune to mortal harm.

Yahweh has entered human experience to share our limitations and struggles in the theophany to Abram and Sarai, he ate what she cooked (Genesis 18:1ff). His holiness did not preclude his involvement with us. Neither was it compromised by his contact with Earth.

Then the Word “became flesh and made his dwelling among us” as Jesus of Nazareth (John 1:14). He was not an invulnerable Superman. To the contrary, his heart could break for hurting and outcast persons. He flinched and bled under the lash. He died on a Roman cross.

Our God is not remote, detached, and unmoved. “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity . . .” (Hebrews 2:14). “Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted” (Hebrews 2:18). In Jesus, we do not have a Savior “who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are” (Hebrews 4:15).

The only perfect person in history so identified himself with our imperfections that he drew to himself (and made comfortable!) some of the most unsavory characters you can imagine. There was a woman who had gone through five divorces and was living with a sixth man when Jesus met her. There were lepers and publicans, political radicals and prostitutes.

Do we have a message about God to preach to the world? Do we have a message from God to share? And are we pained that we are so ineffective in communicating it so as to win converts to our Lord? Do we lament that people don't come to us in the numbers or with the openness they showed to him?

Maybe we have served the true God with the spirit of the false gods. Perhaps we have been remote, detached, and unmoved. Possibly we are perceived as being more interested in our institution than in broken peoples' pain.

Since our God has dirty hands, we can neither be unconcerned about the human condition nor uninvolved with life's most defiled victims.

Nameless Tinder – Kindling for a Revival

by Harold Shank

November – December, 1993

Except for Lazarus and Bartimaeus, most of them don't have names. Yet they were the unassuming kindling for a world-shaping revival.

Some we know by location: the two blind men at Jericho, the sightless man at Bethsaida, the sick man at the Sheep's Gate pool, the demoniac in Gerasene.

Others we identify by their relatives. Peter's mother-in-law, Jairus' daughter, the Syrophenician woman's daughter, the centurion's servant.

Some defy simple description: the paralytic with four strong friends, the demon-filled son of a faithful dad at the foot of Mt. Tabor, the man in synagogue with a withered hand, the frightened woman with a hemorrhage on the streets of Capernaum.

Many we recognize only by their condition: "the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind." Jesus discussed their situation with the wealthy clientele at a dinner party (Luke 14:13). He faxed a cryptic message about the same group John's prison cell: "... the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them" (Luke 7:22).

Out of these nameless tinder came a roaring fire that swept across the Mediterranean world. Confronting a world of barbarism, slavery, cruelty, and inequality, masses of disenfranchised people followed Jesus in the largest peaceful revolution in human history. They ignited a blaze so hot that the heat reached the corridors of power. Few would have suspected world-wide change from such nondescript kindling.

I believe that any revival sparked in contemporary America will find the same fire-hungry tinder among the hurting, down-and-out people of our urban areas. The drug-infested ghettos, crime-filled alleys, and poverty-dominated high rises wait for a Christian spark. Inner cities reformed by Christ would provide the watching world with convincing evidence of God's power. The heat of spiritual renewal among the poor would reach into areas now closed to the gospel.

Could such a revival happen in America? Can Christians recreate in our own day the kind of concern Jesus evidenced for the poor? Will spiritual fire sweep through our cities? Three developments give us hope that revival may be on the way.

Aggressive Benevolence

The rapid spread of aggressive benevolence in Churches of Christ during the last decade reflects renewed interest in the poor. Aggressive benevolence refers to programs which actively seek to help impoverished people as opposed to serving only those who seek us out. Instead of keeping a

closet of old clothes and canned goods in a remote corner of the building, large numbers of churches take the clothes and food directly to the poor. Rather than waiting for the down-and-out to come and beg, these churches preserve the dignity of the disenfranchised by asking them how they need to be helped. Those who are served participate in their own recovery.

Programs of aggressive benevolence have multiplied since the late 1970s. Determined efforts for victims of Hurricane Andrew or the flood victims in Iowa reflect a new assertiveness with regard to the unfortunate.

An impressive number of aggressive programs feed, house, and serve the disenfranchised, including these:

- Dozens of Dallas churches feed hundreds of homeless people under a downtown freeway ramp each Sunday.
- Christians in Brooklyn Center, Minnesota provide food monthly for homeless people in Minneapolis.
- The 16th and Pile congregation runs a food co-op program for Clovis, New Mexico families at or below the poverty line.
- Each week, about 60 from Seattle's Northwest church feed the homeless people on a local street called Skid Row.
- The Whitehall Church of Christ holds membership in the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank. Twice a week while recipients choose their own food, Whitehall members talk and listen.
- The Food Room volunteers at Richland Hills in Fort Worth distributed 15,355 bags of food to 9,534 people in the first six months of 1993.
- Nearly 400 low-income children in Lubbock, Texas, receive nourishing meals each weekend from the Carpenter's Kitchen, sponsored by the Broadway Church of Christ.
- Woodmont Hills' Little Red Schoolhouse provides school supplies to hundreds of Nashville children too poor to buy paper and pencils for school.
- The Highland School Store in Memphis has provided school supplies for 12,148 students since 1990.
- Wichita's Central church operates a winter shelter for homeless people. One month last winter, they provided 1,223 meals.
- The Mid-County church in St. Louis regularly sends participants from its spiritual internship program into ghetto areas to clean toilets, paint houses, and improve inner-city life.
- Teenagers from churches in six states have painted 99 houses in the poor areas of Memphis over the last five years.
- Rolling closets in Nashville, Birmingham, Chattanooga, and Little Rock take clothing directly to inner-city residents.
- Youth Hobby Shop in Nashville provides constructive programs for inner-city youth.
- Teens from the Hermitage Road church in Richmond, Virginia, sponsor trips to parades and museums for the children of homeless mothers at the Women's Shelter.
- Last August, Memphis teenagers did chores, taught classes, and made friends at the Timothy Hill Children's Ranch on Long Island, where two dozen homeless boys from New York City live.

- In Canada, the Beamsville, Ontario church offers warm, comfortable housing and accepting friendship through a church-owned 36-unit housing complex located across the street from their building.

The list goes on! Hundreds of churches aggressively seek the poor for Christ! Could this be evidence of a coming spiritual revival in America's urban core?

Seeking Justice

Not only are Churches of Christ becoming more aggressive about compassion, but there is also evidence of efforts to seek justice. Biblical justice as articulated by prophets like Amos and Isaiah calls for the unfortunate to get their fair share of life. Instead of listening to voices that say the church should not be involved in causes of fairness and equality, many seek to let justice flow like a mighty river. Although most efforts still resemble a small stream, God may bless us with a stronger current in the future. Efforts at justice include these developments:

- Women abused by their husbands often escape by leaving home. But rather than face homelessness, many return to increased abusiveness. The Richland Hills church in Fort Worth said, "No." Using resources in the community, they offer abused women safe, low-cost, transitional shelter in houses foreclosed by Tarrant County banks. Through their Adopt-a-Family Partnership led by Jan Johnson, they have provided homes for 67 families. Rather than allow abuse to continue, these Christians call for justice.
- Poor children in Tijuana, Mexico often miss out on basic necessities of life. One eight-year-old girl never fully recovered from polio. When she outgrew an old leg brace, she had to drop out of school. Christians from the Malibu, California church said, "No." Dr. Bill Stivers recognized the girl's predicament and told the story to his Spanish and French classes at Pepperdine University. A church-run clinic in the basement of the Anexa Morelos church building used the Pepperdine resources. This Tijuana girl now runs to school with her friends.
- A few years ago, chronically unemployed and homeless people in Memphis had little future. Trapped in the poorest city in America, they had no one to help. Memphis churches said, "No." Led by Wayne Reed, Ron Bergeron, Katherine Moore, and Verlon Harp, they forged a bold initiative with a Life Skills lab. They supported homeless people through a 13-week lab program which developed job-finding and -keeping skills, improved self-esteem, and explored spiritual values. Over 70 percent of the lab graduates are now fully self-supporting. Memphis now has a justice advocate for the chronically unemployed.

Efforts at seeking justice remain scattered and small, but are growing and successful. Along with aggressive benevolence, justice ministries point to a coming spiritual revival.

Spiritual Renewal

Although some Churches of Christ continue to give up on the inner-city and flee to the suburbs, other congregations have turned their hearts toward the city. The bold outreaches of aggressive benevolence and justice ministries do not exhaust the struggling movement to serve the poor.

Inner-city ministries across the nation have challenged the ghettos by planting new congregations right in their midst. Lytle Thomas in Nashville, Ron Pittman in Birmingham, Brian Davis in Chattanooga, Benny Bittle in North Little Rock, Ron Sellers and Charlie Middlebrook in Houston, Anthony Wood in Memphis, Frank Lott and Roger Putman in Chicago, Kenneth Gilmore in Tampa, Joe Roberts and Charles Landreth in Dallas, Ron Wheeler and John Massie in San Antonio, Kinwood Devore in San Francisco, and no doubt others, have all planted new Churches of Christ in America's inner cities in recent years. Most of these churches are growing, providing spiritual food for starved ghettos. All of them have the potential to transform the inner-city.

As these inner city Churches of Christ begin to remake the ghetto, all America will take notice. As transformed lives hit the streets, the sidewalks and alleys of the ghetto will never be the same.

- Houston's Ron Sellers tells about a Christian woman who met John at a homeless shelter. She invited him to church and afterwards home for dinner. John started attending a weekly Bible study, gave up his drugs, got a job as a carpenter's helper, and was eventually baptized into Christ. Five years later, he graduate with honors at Abilene Christian University. Now he's working with the church that found him, helping to find others.
- Two men – one Hispanic, the other black – spent their lives in rival California gangs. Dueling led them to prison. During parole, they ended up in Fresh Start, a ministry of Churches of Christ in San Francisco. Kinwood DeVore reports that the two, baptized within a week of each other, are not only brothers, but evangelists for Christ.
- Jeff Smith started riding the bus to Nashville's Inner-City Church of Christ. The bus ride proved to be life changing. Having grown up in Nashville's projects, Jeff turned to Christ, attended David Lipscomb University, and now works as part of the inner-city church team.

Flying Sparks

Multiply Houston's John, the San Francisco duo, and Nashville's Jeff by one hundred, and the spark ignites a flame. Extend the inner-city church plantings from a couple dozen cities to al 329 metropolitan areas in the United States, and the flame becomes a blaze. Start Life Skills labs in major urban areas, extend urban outreach into the inner cities, and the blaze will leap across the country.

Does the evidence point to spiritual revival in America? I'm optimistic. It's not time to sit and wait. It's time to jump up and work. It's time to advocate for aggressive benevolence, not in 500 congregations but in 5,000. It's time to develop justice ministries not just in six cities, but in 60. It's time to plant missions for Christ across the street from every bar in America. It's time to start new churches on every street corner where agents of evil now sell crack. It's time to take America for Christ!

Lessons in Poverty

by David Leeson

November – December, 1993

It was Ashley's birthday. She was seven years old and I was hoping to make photographs at her party.

I had been working all week on a story about the impoverished community of Sandbranch which sits at the raw edge of the Dallas city limits. Ashley lived there with 11 other children under the care of elderly grandparents in a home which would have been condemned had it been built just a few blocks north inside Dallas.

The roof constantly leaked and parts of it had fallen. None of the doors worked, most of the window panes were missing, there was no running water, and the toilet was broken. It was so overrun with roaches that the children's sleep was often interrupted with one crawling in their mouth, nose, or ears.

Nonetheless, I stood on their front porch, surveying the immense poverty engulfing Ashley's family and asked, "When are you going to have the party?"

She stood in the doorway behind a screen door so filled with holes I wondered why they bothered with the door at all. Her grandmother, Erma, stood quietly behind her, gently rocking an infant grandson in the crook of her fleshy arms.

An awkward few seconds passed before anyone answered my question. It took less time than that for me to realize that I was about to get another painful lesson in poverty.

"Well," Erma began, "We're not going to do anything just yet, but I'm going to try to make her a cake if I get some money before the weekend." I mumbled something ridiculously pleasant, like "How nice," and left.

My heart hurt somewhere deep inside. Ashley had said nothing with words but her downcast eyes had said everything. There wasn't going to be any party. Parties cost money.

I felt a blazing, red-faced shame at my ignorance. In the world where I live, children never wonder if there will be a party but whether it will be with Pogo the Pony in the backyard or with Ronald at McDonald's.

Later I learned that an uncle gave her a dollar. It had been her only present. She used the money to buy herself and a sister a Coke. Of course, the weekend arrived sooner than any hope of money and the cake and the party were forgotten.

I learned a similar lesson a few years ago while doing stories about the Asian refugee population of East Dallas. At the time, more than 4,000 people were living inside a one-square-mile radius of inner-city ghetto called “Little Asia.”

The poverty was numbing. One of the stories in the series was about two brothers who fought over a bowl of rice. One was killed and the other went to prison. Their mother told us the story and showed me the bowl.

I saw children who lived on a single, bony chicken leg and a handful of rice each day. It was common to see two different families living together in single or two bedroom apartments filled with wall-to-wall mattresses. Sheets hung across strings in mock privacy to form dividing “walls.”

While shooting pictures in one of these apartments, I came across an inquisitive eight-year-old boy. He seemed to stay no more than six inches from me the entire time I took photos and jotted down notes.

We didn’t talk much because his English wasn’t very good. Mostly we just grinned at one another. But since it was nearly Christmas, I wanted to know what he wanted from Santa.

He studied his feet for a long time, and then the ceiling. I grinned in amusement at his laborious decision. Either that, or he was struggling with his English. Or maybe he didn’t even understand the question. Nonetheless I waited and grinned.

Finally his eyes landed upon a small shelf located high upon the wall. He turned with bright eyes, his answer ready, and said, “I want Santa to bring me some notebook paper for Christmas.”

My grin faded into quiet amusement. “Notebook paper?” I asked. “Why?” In my world, a child’s list always seems to last longer than the time it takes to hear it. And at my home, they are usually filled with expectations greater than Santa’s wallet.

My own children struggled over whether to ask for a Nintendo or a Sega Genesis video game system. Hours of thinking went into their final decision.

So, why did he want Santa to bring notebook paper? he wanted to color pictures at home but his mother would not allow him to waste paper. The \$1.39 cost was more than they could afford and therefore it was restricted to school use only. Sure enough, there upon that small shelf was a thin packet of paper out of reach for young boys.

There have been many other teachers in my life, such as Megan, an overweight three-year-old daughter of a homeless prostitute who slept on the hood of an early model Ford Maverick in the hot Dallas summer. My daughter sleeps in an Ethan Allen sleigh bed.

Or the children I’ve seen hanging out with their mothers in the sleazy darkness surrounding speakeasy clubs. I’ve faced 14-year-old crack dealers and wondered why Uzis have replaced baseball bats as the sports equipment of choice.

And there are the dead ones. Children who lost a battle they were never allowed to fight, caught in the cross fires of abuse and neglect. I have seen their tiny caskets.

There are, of course, more lessons. But don't be discouraged. God's people care about people. In Sandbranch we organized a work crew to fix Ashley's house. The church has also helped the family with Christmas the past two years.

The boy in Little Asia got his notebook paper and so did hundreds of other refugees after the church collected and distributed rice and school supplies over a five-year period.

It was on one of those trips distributing school supplies that I was able to witness the true meaning of Christian service.

Dallas Christian School, working in conjunction with Highland Oaks church in Dallas was in charge of the giveaway that year. Some of the kids from the school went with us to Little Asia for the giveaway.

It was cold outside and temperatures were dropping when two Dallas Christian cheerleaders came up to me with concern on their faces. "Mr. Leeson," they began, "some of these people don't have any shoes." I could see they were truly bothered by what they were seeing. I shrugged my shoulders and said, "You're right. That's why we're here." But we didn't have any shoes with us.

I became busy with something else and was away from the main group for 15 to 20 minutes. When I returned I saw the cheerleaders. They seemed happier. As I got closer, I realized why. Looking down, I saw they were both barefoot.

When I get discouraged, I remember that day and wiggle my toes.

Because God Is

by Billie Silvey

November – December, 1993

“No Justice, No Peace” was the sermon topic announced by the young minister. It was a common slogan in Los Angeles – both before and after the riots – and I was eager to see what he’d say about it. He explained that the church dealt only with spiritual matters and isn’t concerned about social justice. His definition of justice was begin right with God’s laws. If we are, he said, we’ll have no peace with those who aren’t.

I couldn’t help thinking that the concept of justice is broader than that. The word is not used in Scripture merely to mean righteousness in relation with God. As Christians we have another dimension to our relationships. If we aren’t righteous in the way we treat each other, we can’t have a good relationship with God either.

The Old Testament Records God’s Concern for JusticeAs Rick Atchley points out, there’s a simple reason why the church should be concerned about social justice – because God is. Throughout Scripture God shows a special concern for the poor, the weak, the disenfranchised.

It begins in the beginning, with the creation of the world. God placed the rest of his creation in the care of his prime creation, human beings. Still there was no question whom the earth actually belonged to. God placed limitations on the use of his creation, and punishment was swift and certain when his restrictions were ignored (See Genesis 2:16-17; 3:17).

All belongs to God to be used according to his purposes (Psalms 24:1 and 50:10-11).

Later, in the law of Moses, God placed further restrictions on the use of the land. It could be cultivated for six years, but on the seventh it would lie fallow, not just because that’s good soil management, but “that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild beasts may eat” (Exodus 23:10-11).

Even during the years of cultivation, owners were not to harvest to the borders of their fields or gather what remained after the first pass through. They weren’t to strip their vineyards or pick up fallen grapes. That was for the poor and sojourner (Leviticus 19:9-10).

Then, on the fiftieth, or Jubilee year, all property reverted to its original owners, and slaves were freed (Leviticus 25:10).

This sharing was not an act of unusual kindness or generosity. It was what God expected of his people. God’s earth was to be used for the good of all.

Later, through the prophets, God condemned Israel for failing to carry out his demands. “Seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow,” God said. If you don’t, you’re wasting your time worshiping me (Isaiah 1:11-17, 58:6-7. See also Amos 5:21-24; Micah 6:6-8).

When God asks, “What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor?” he’s not accusing them of remarkable acts of cruelty against specific poor people. He’s saying that they failed to follow his commandments and leave part of the produce of their vineyards for those who needed it. They took it all for themselves. That was their sin (Isaiah 3:14-15; see also Amos 2:7-7a; 5:10-15; 8:4-6).

The prophets’ denunciations of the cries of the poor often are juxtaposed with warnings against the self-indulgence of the rich (Isaiah 5:7; Amos 4:1; 6:1-7). God calls this lack of justice robbery and wrong (Isaiah 61:8).

God’s Concern for Justice in the New Testament

The coming of Jesus didn’t change God’s views on justice. Jesus teaches his followers to give to those who beg from us (Matthew 5:42; Luke 6:30-31). He instructs us on our motivation as we give alms (Matthew 6:2-4). He warns against laying up treasures for ourselves (6:19), and trying to serve both God and money (6:24).

The rich young ruler was told to sell all. Jesus’ followers were told to leave all. And the parable of the rich man and Lazarus warns us that, if we don’t, we might lose all (Matthew 19:16-30; Mark 10:17-31; Luke 18:18-30; Matthew 16:24-26; Luke 16:19-31).

Jesus saw himself as the ultimate year of Jubilee, bringing good news to the poor and release to the captives (Luke 4:18-21).

When his church began, the believers sold all they had and distributed it among the poor (Acts 2:44-45).

Paul spent much of his ministry collecting funds from Gentile churches to help the poor Christians in Jerusalem. As he explained it, “As a matter of equality your abundance at the present time should supply their want, so that their abundance may supply your want, that there may be equality” (2 Corinthians 8:14-15).

The Biblical View of Justice and Its Implications for Us

Often in discussing the biblical view of justice, we consider only the negatives – that God will give us our just desserts if we do wrong. We’ve failed to emphasize the positive aspects of justice.

The whole world belongs to God for the use and benefit of people. If we seek equity and fairness in our use of God’s resources, we will be blessed, but if we’re selfish and hold onto what we have, we’ll lose it.

Another way to look at the biblical view of justice, according to Harold Shank, is to consider the difference between justice and benevolence.

Benevolence is being kind to someone who needs help. However, like giving castoff clothing to someone who needs it, it allows us to help without real sacrifice on our part. And its effects are generally temporary.

Justice, on the other hand, seeks equity by empowering a person to have the same advantages we have. It may call for a real sacrifice of time, effort and money – for instance, helping someone learn skills so they can get a job and buy their own clothes. But its effects often are long-lasting.

Four Considerations about Our Possessions and God's Justice

What is the message of God's justice for us as Christians in a land of great material resources? We have an income, food and homes, but the number of those without these basic necessities is growing at an alarming rate. What can we do with our jobs and mortgages, our children needing orthodontia and savings for college?

- Consider how we feel about our possessions. Are they really ours to use in whatever way we wish?
- Consider how we live. Do we live in luxury while others are suffering?
- Consider how we use our resources. Do we share generously with those who need our help?
- Consider the results of our sharing. Is there some way we can make our gifts produce greater equity and have longer-lasting results?

I hope my young preaching friend comes to realize that the church must be concerned, not just about being right with God, but being just toward those around us. Because – thumbing through the Bible – we soon realize that God is.

We Can Be the Church of Christ

by Don Flatt

November – December, 1993

The Apostle Paul spells out the possibility of religious stability by asking that we “be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine” (Ephesians 4:14). Peter adds, “Sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear” (1 Peter 3:15).

Although early nineteenth-century Americans were “tossed to and fro,” they were so confident of finding the “right way” that they often changed church membership. Two of the four Presbyterian ministers who joined Barton W. Stone in starting the Restoration Movement at Cane Ridge, near Paris, Kentucky, later became Shakers. The other two returned to Presbyterianism.

Orestes Brownson, a nineteenth-century writer, set the record for being “carried about with every wind of doctrine.” His spiritual odyssey led him from the Methodists to a New England Restoration group of “Christians.”

This “intellectual desperado” later joined the Presbyterians. Concluding they were too formal, he tried to remove himself as far as possible from Calvinism by becoming a Universalist minister. He edited a New Hampshire Universalist journal known as *The Gospel Advocate* (not to be confused with the current journal with the same name). Disappointed with his chaotic freedom to believe anything he wished, he turned to Robert Owen, Scottish agnostic, who encouraged him to give up his hopeless search for the right group.

Unwilling to admit he hadn’t found “the truth,” Brownson moved in and out of Freemasonry. Fearing that the winter of old age would soon leave him “lost in the wilderness of doubt,” he drifted into Unitarianism, which he thought would combine love with morals. After four years, his intoxication with hope led him, in 1836, to start his own group – the Church of the Future – only to discover he couldn’t convert anyone to his “world-wide movement.” Next, he tried to ignite a religious revolution by writing a biography of Jesus, but no one would buy a copy of the book.

After sampling the American cafeteria of religious options, Brownson entered a Transcendentalist commune, only to be snubbed by Ralph Waldo Emerson. At 41, he converted to Catholicism and spent his remaining 32 years warning Protestants that “outside the Church there is no salvation.” Convinced that he had located the truth, he felt sorry for anyone who had failed to arrive at the same religious destination he had found.

How is your spiritual odyssey coming along? Are you “nearer to heaven today” than last year? Did you discover some point along the way where you were satisfied enough that you quit asking

questions? Did you settle on a date in the 1800s, when all possible truth had been learned so that all you had to do afterwards was to accept someone else's conclusions?

Brownson's intellectual inquisitiveness shames those Christians who proudly assert, "I stand exactly where I stood 40 years ago." This may be great – or it could merely represent four long decades of being afraid to use the mind God gave you.

It's all right to use your mind. Go to the Bible to find your doctrine, not to prove it. The Bereans "were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true" (Acts 17:11). Never question the motives of a struggler or a searcher. Allow questions to be raised without questioning motives.

"There is more faith in honest doubt," Huston Smith suggests, "than in all the unexamined creeds of the world." The first-century church did not force members to leave their minds outside the building. The church should never drive truth-seekers to other groups to find a place where they can ask questions. Neither should it force members to play religious games for fear that intellectual honesty might get them into trouble. Never equate "Doubting Thomas" with "Sinning Thomas!"

We need not, as Brownson, become spiritual drifters. We can be the Church of Christ! We have a scriptural name, book, mission, organization, plan of salvation, plan of worship, and set of moral standards. What more could anyone want?

The answer? Enough spiritual energy to transform the above into a living organism, known as the spiritual body of Christ. Jesus told his followers that although he was leaving this earth, "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you," which he does through the Holy Spirit (John 14:18).

The physical body of Christ inhabited a tiny spot on the globe, but his spiritual body has gone everywhere. Christ dwells within the temple of every believer's heart (1 Corinthians 6:19). Wherever believers go, Christ goes. Since, physically, Christ cannot be in your community today, his spiritual body must be doing the same things he would be pursuing if he did live there.

Are we losing our identity? We will never become everything God wants us to be by merely slavishly following a set pattern arrived at by a certain date in the 1800s. Rather, we will continue to please him by using a scriptural framework through which to carry out the mission that Christ gave his spiritual body. If Jesus spent a week in your community, where would you find him? At church? Visiting the sick in the local hospital? Caring for those without enough food to eat or clothes to wear? Getting involved in every good cause that has a chance of helping people? Soothing the hurting? Or all of the above!

The twenty-first century will demand that we own our faith, not merely inherit it. Although we may not yet have answered every question, we can learn how to live with our questions while continuing to walk hand-in-hand with Jesus. Owning our faith brings a freshness of spiritual energy and vitality we can never know by simply inheriting it.

The person who owns his faith can stand any test – intellectual, emotional, or moral – and endure extreme suffering. Having worked through your questions and doubts, you can then defend your faith, as well as accept its costs and consequences.

Does merely putting the name outside the building make us the Church of Christ? Does merely protecting the doctrine arrived at by some “magical” date make us the Church of Christ? What a thrill to know that we can be the “Church of Christ!”

Becoming One Flesh

by Larry W. Bridgesmith

November – December, 1993

They sat at opposite ends of the sofa. Neither looked in the other's direction. Glances never met. Staccato speech belied a seething hostility barely beneath the surface as each tried to act civilly while civility was the farthest thing from their minds.

Another marriage in shambles. Two lives shattered by the unrealized expectations of an unrealistic bride and groom. The wedding was beautiful, the marriage was not. After six years, the honeymoon was definitely finished. Unfortunately, so were faith, hope, and love.

I thought, "At least they are willing to work on it. At least they are willing to talk and pray about it." I was grateful they would meet and agree to look outside themselves for solutions to the problems that threatened to destroy the sacred covenant they once made in the sight of "God and all these witnesses." I prayed, "Please God, help them see that which joins them is far more powerful than that which would separate them."

Trying desperately to find common ground, I asked them to tell me about their wedding. I asked about guests, songs, colors, and attendants. Curt responses followed, devoid of emotion. I asked about the ceremony, the minister and the vows.

He smirked and with a cutting tone reserved only for the most reviled said, "I guess that's the problem. She's not too big on 'cleaving.'" He went on to explain that his wife did not act as if she understood his need for physical intimacy, or if she did, she obviously did not care. His stony glare testified to the memory of embraces unreturned, of passion unfulfilled.

She replied that he also had difficulty with Genesis 2:24 because he did not know what it meant to "leave" his father and mother. She recounted instances when her husband's family assumed greater importance than either she or the family unit they were trying to form. Tears and sobs punctuated her grievances.

Prayer, encouragement, and a request to seek professional counseling was all I could give them. I wish I could report that their wills softened, that their hearts became submissive and that their marriage survived. It didn't. Their rights overcame their wrongs and the law insured that each received an "equitable share of the marital estate." The court granted them an absolute divorce ... absolutely.

As they drove away that day, each in a separate car, I thought how much our fellowship is like a marriage at risk: A battle of wills. Control versus submission. Me first. My way or the highway. My rights and your wrongs.

After their cars rounded the last curve leading from the house, I turned once more to Genesis 2:24. I discovered again the formula for unit. Leaving and cleaving leads to oneness. Leaving

that which is comfortable, that from which we care and clinging to the other, not our own self-interest, makes us one.

In our marriages and in our churches we often elevate one element over the other or turn each inside out. We cling selfishly to our wants and desires. We demand that our preferences be satisfied. Insisting on our way and getting it if we are insistent enough.

Instead we need to learn how to cling to the best interests of each other, pursuing the other's good over our own. Wrapping our waist with a towel, we need to become the servant of each other, striving to be the first to wash the other's dirty feet.

Leaving may be even harder to do. Leaving the comfort of our traditions, the comfort of our self-satisfaction and comfort of our self-importance is essential if we wish to become one with another. Your expectations of the contours of Christian fellowship are rarely the same as mine. Each of us must relinquish some aspect of our idealized view in order to become one with each other.

The only way we can co-exist with our differences is for God to make them clear to us (Philippians 3:15). He does that when we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the source and author of our faith, as we press on to the goal. When our eyes are fixed on our differences, our wants and our desires, there is no room for God to work. Just as in marriage we must learn to cling to the other's best interests and leave our comfort zone for true unity to result.

May God grant us the grace and good sense to stop sitting in stony silence, or even open hostility, destroying the covenant relationship God intended for his church. The beautiful bride of Christ requires no less than our sacrificial, selfless, and servant-like dedication to each other and the groom to whom we are wed. The unity God intended is bigger than our petty jealousies and the self-interested agendas that would separate us. After all, a marriage is forever and our covenant should never be broken.

Of Mercy and Justice

by Bruce Woodall

November – December, 1993

The first migrant workers I ever knew were the ones my father hired on our East Texas ranch. They were “wetbacks,” alien workers from Mexico who crossed the Rio Grande by night and provided a major part of the agricultural labor in Texas. Most of them were married men who worked for a few months and sent their money back home to families in impoverished Mexican villages.

It is a tribute to the way my father treated hired help that I did not for many years associate our ranch hands with such third world ideas as exploitation and economic injustice. During my training as a physician, I gained a much better understanding of America’s migrant workers when Dale and I were asked to staff a seasonal clinic in the fruit-producing region of South Carolina near our residency hospital.

Migrant farm laborers hardly fit the stereotype of the medically indigent many are familiar with. Demographically, the migrant population is estimated at 3 million to 5 million workers and their families nationwide. Eighty-five percent are ethnic minorities, predominantly Spanish-speaking Latin Americans whose numbers include Mexican aliens, Central American refugees, and Hispanic-American citizens of multi-generational migrant heritage.

Migrants today consist of predominantly intact family units who live as part of working communities supporting a vital cog in our nation’s economic wheel. In 1989, they harvested \$253 million worth of U.S. crops, allowing American families to continue spending a smaller percentage of their budget on food than people in most other countries.

Yet for the most part, America’s migrants remain a disenfranchised third-world people – in some cases living and working virtually across the fence from American churches scarcely aware of their existence. They provide us with a contemporary case study of institutionalized oppression, an unpleasant concept we tend to associate with corrupt foreign governments and primitive third-world societies. Perhaps it has been the ability to distance ourselves from the realities of overt structural injustice that has made it an easy subject to overlook.

But God is not pleased when we overlook the oppressed. “Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustices; who makes his neighbor work for nothing, and does not give them their wages; who says ‘I will build myself a spacious house with large upper rooms’ Did your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him, He judged the cause of the poor and the needy, then it was well. Is this not to know me? says the Lord” (Jeremiah 22:13-16).

The living conditions endured by migrants cover the spectrum. Some are overcrowded, dilapidated shelters without indoor plumbing or refrigeration. Some facilities are managed by conscientious farmers who provide good housing, dining halls, and full-time camp cooks. They

are the exceptions. Most labor camps are substandard at best. Housing and camp standard regulations vary from state to state, and often go unenforced for lack of inspection personnel.

For the duration of the harvest season most migrant families will indenture themselves to a “crew boss,” typically a bilingual American citizen who operates as an agent contracting with produce owners for harvest jobs. Crew bosses, many of which are former migrant laborers themselves, hire, manage, and pay migrant labor crews, who remain dependent upon them for work assignments and their most basic needs.

In many cases, migrant workers receive a daily wage only when work is available, while their bosses make daily pay deductions for room, board, alcohol, tobacco, and other items regardless of work availability. In a lean harvest year when work is scarce, the workers run the risk of completing the season in debt to their crew boss, a liability that may be carried over to the next year, creating a predicament reminiscent of the “company store” servitude of mining history infamy. Some crew bosses have also been known to increase their own profits by cutting corners on worker pay and care expenditures.

The system – produce growers who deal only with crew boss and have little or no direct responsibility to the workers, coupled with crew bosses in a position of near absolute power over the workers, especially those who speak no English or who can be threatened with deportation – is ripe for exploitation.

Where work is abundant, all family members age 12 and over go to the fields while younger children baby-sit their infant and toddler siblings. This arrangement is an economic necessity. As farm work is exempt from minimum wage laws and sporadic, the average yearly income is \$7,500 per family, all wage earners combined.

Because the harvest season lasts longer than public school summer break, and the agricultural industry also is exempt from child labor laws beyond age 12, it is not surprising that only 12% of migrant children ever receive a high school diploma. Nationwide, an estimated 250,000 full-time migrant workers are under age 17.

Migrant farm workers are among America’s true working poor, unable to afford health insurance yet ineligible for Medicaid because they are unemployed. The result is seen in the health status of the workers themselves:

- Their average life expectancy is 49 years. The national average is 73.5 years.
- Farm labor recently surpassed mining as statistically the most dangerous occupation in America, yet in most states the workers are ineligible for Worker’s Compensation.
- Migrants contract parasitic infections at 20 times the national average.
- Thirty-eight percent of migrant children will suffer an acute respiratory infection compared to 17% of the general populace.
- Only 10% of migrant children under the age of six get an annual medical examination and less than a third have an annual dental checkup.
- Childhood mortality among migrants is 1.6 times higher than the U.S. average.

Presently the bulk of migrant health care services flow through a network of federally subsidized clinics designed to meet their particular needs. Traditionally, language and cultural barriers as well as the peculiarities of their work and lifestyles have made it difficult for migrant workers to use conventional health care facilities, except in the case of severe illness or childbirth.

At best, migrant health needs remain grossly underserved. Yet simply expanding the migrant clinic network will do little to change the realities seen in the dismal health statistics. As long as migrants remain locked into a structurally oppressive system, social services alone remain temporary and palliative.

As a religious movement we have always been open to social service, or works of mercy toward the poor and needy. At the same time we have shied away from social action, or the quest for justice aimed at alleviating the sources of suffering that create the need for our works of mercy. When we speak of a biblical response to the poor and oppressed our hearts soften at the thought that there are poor in need of help. We have a commendable tradition of impressive generosity when presented with genuine need. We are less comfortable with the idea that some are poor because they are oppressed, perhaps even by social or economic systems in which we are participants or at least in which we have the power to enact change. A consistent biblical response mandates a response to both the needs and the causes of suffering. In reality a distinction between social service and social action is neither biblical nor practical.

What is needed for migrants in particular is careful directed action for reform of at least three aspects of the migrant labor system: child labor, wages, and protection from abuse by unethical crew bosses. Changes such as these require the integrated involvement of committed and well-informed healthcare providers, lawyers, politicians, journalists, and businessmen. here are some things we can do:

Become Well Informed

Meet and listen to the poor and those involved with their concerns. Visit their homes and workplaces and gain as broad a perspective as possible. There is much we can learn from experienced believers in churches with strong traditions of social involvement. Take full advantage of the fact that everyone involved has an insight and some power to enact change.

Study the Issues

On the surface things may appear simple, yet in reality they are not. The migrant system is one example of a complex, deeply entrenched economic and sociological institution for which there are no simple solutions.

Imagine changing the law to make employment of migrant children illegal, a seemingly appropriate reform. The loudest cries of protest would come from the migrants themselves. A household living so close to the edge financially can scarcely afford the luxury of able-bodied members who do not work and contribute to the family income.

Consider also the question of wage reform. Under the present market bidding system, produce growers do not set prices for their harvest. The buyers bid a price and the grower can take it or reject it. So the growers have no power to raise prices on their crops to compensate for added costs, such as minimum wage labor. Asking the producers alone to bear that cost rather than passing it on to the consumer, would bankrupt many farms, further limiting what meager jobs are available to unskilled farm workers.

Regarding education, advocates of the poor will face perhaps the most tenacious of obstacles – the internalization of poverty. Having lived in a culture of impoverishment for generations, many migrants do not believe they can succeed in any other lifestyle. They may, for example, see little or not value in education, leaving migrant children without family encouragement to remain in school.

Educate the Public

During our time in South Carolina we were surprised to find most people in the town where we lived were unaware that more than 2,000 migrants come into the county each summer. They arrive in the dark of the night, stay a short while at each location, and remain cloistered within the work camp. They are mostly unseen, without voice or political priority. Here are some ways to help more people know about them:

- Contact local news sources and encourage them to run features on migrants in the area, and ask that they emphasize the workers' contribution to the local economy and our country's food surplus, as well as the system's injustice to them.
- Give presentations about migrant healthcare issues to meetings of local healthcare providers, business groups, and churches.
- Challenge churches to see the inconsistency of sending missionaries to Latin America while ignoring oppression of the Hispanics in their midst.

Become Politically Involved

While in residency, I was asked to be part of a state-wide council concerning migrant healthcare issues. Few members of the council actually had direct contact with migrant families, and though orchard owners had been asked to participate, they had a presence at only one meeting.

As a physician to migrants, I was able to give a more accurate view of their situation. Having grown up on a working ranch, I was able to give personal insight into the perspective of the agricultural families who employ them. I also persuaded the council to allocate resources for conferences regarding migrant healthcare issues at each of the family practice residency programs in the state, an intentional targeting of the state's future primary care physicians.

Becoming advocates of the disenfranchised with whom our God so clearly identifies requires that we take our faith to the streets. Institutionalized religion confined to refining doctrine, practicing sacraments, and "keeping oneself unstained by sin" has no power to promote a vision of shalom to the world around us. Our God is not solely the God of the church and the people within it. He is the God of the universe, the secular as well as the sacred. Nowhere does the Bible

state that the political arena or other secular settings are off limits to the Christian seeking to defend his vision of justice and mercy.

Following the Prince of Peace may mean going beyond our traditional comfort zones in direct response to biblical concerns for justice in our communities. A sense of outrage in the face of evil or opposition must result in action on our neighbor's behalf. We must show that our God is a God of justice as well as justification. Unless our actions show that we are serious about dealing with social problems, we will never be perceived as salt and light.

Christian social action may mean that we go to the picket line or participate in a boycott. It might ask that we call or write our congressman or even campaign for men and women of faith willing to fight for godly values within the halls of government. It might ask us to invest time in becoming astute to the burning social issues of the day, daring to take critical looks inward and to ask uncomfortable questions. It may require that we speak up before a public hearing, raise an unpopular objection at a corporate board meeting, or make a protesting withdrawal of our membership from a prestigious professional organization. It might even challenge us to run for public office.

*Speak up for those who cannot speak up for themselves,
for the rights of all who are destitute.
Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor
and needy ~ (Proverbs 31:8-9).*

Hope is Not a Place

by Monte Cox

November – December, 1993

Jackson Kiplalon is a rural African. (I may lose some of you by beginning this way, since you may think some touchy-feely missionary story couldn't possibly relate to whatever's looking you in the face today. But read on.) In January of last year, Jackson was made Assistant Chief in his home area, an entry-level government job. His regular salary, along with his wife Zipporah's income from teaching kindergarten, made it possible for the Kiplalons to build a three-room house with a tin roof, a step up from the traditional one-room mud hut with a grass roof. With their two small children, Jackson and Zipporah have been the backbone of the church in their village since its establishment in 1986. A young, upwardly-mobile couple, they have been models of Christian commitment and a living representation of what most of their peers aspire to in terms of financial stability and personal happiness in this impoverished nation.

But all of that changed in May of last year when Zipporah fell sick in her eighth month of pregnancy. When she complained of stomach pains, the local "doctor," trained only to dispense aspirin and malaria pills, told her that the pain was probably nothing to worry about. Days later, after Zipporah had lost much blood, Jackson decided it was time to take her to the nearest maternity ward nine miles away across the river. With no gurney to carry her on or vehicle to carry her in, Jackson removed a wooden door from the house, recruited several neighbors, and together they carried Zipporah, lying on the door, the nine miles to the hospital. They arrived early on a Saturday morning. Since it was a weekend, there were no doctors or nurses around. Nor was there any gas in the hospital ambulance to take Zipporah to a better facility, nor telephone to call for help. Jackson and his friends were not surprised at any of these circumstances. They have just come to accept them as just the way things are.

Zipporah suffered through the weekend, delivering a stillborn baby in the pre-dawn hours of Monday. She continued to lose much blood. When the doctor arrived, he sent Jackson home to gather possible blood donors from among relatives, those whose blood might match his wife's (There is no blood bank at this little hospital.) It took Jackson most of Monday to make the nine-mile trip home on foot, find enough potential donors, and return to the hospital. The doctor then told him that the hospital was not equipped for typing the blood or administering it to Zipporah. Finally, someone found enough gas stored in a can in one of the local shops to drive her at least as far as the nearest paved road 30 miles away. There they hoped to find another vehicle to take Zipporah to the larger hospital another 30 miles beyond. They made it to the paved road by evening. Unfortunately, there are few vehicles on this remote stretch of African highway, especially at night. Before the first one passed, Zipporah bled to death. She was 24 years old.

The ambulance driver managed to borrow enough gas from the first passing vehicle to make the trip back to the village immediately and spare Jackson and those with him the awkwardness of asking strangers to house a corpse for the night. Many relatives hadn't even heard that Zipporah was sick when she was buried early the next morning. Jackson wrote me two letters in quick

succession informing me of her death – two, because, knowing the inefficiency of his country’s postal service, he was afraid I might not get the first one.

Jackson is a fatalist. That doesn’t mean he wants to kill himself. It means simply that he does not believe that he is in control of the factors that influence his life or the lives of those he loves. As you can tell from the story, he has good reason to feel he is not in control. What you cannot tell just from the story is that Jackson lives in a spiritual world filled with unseen forces whose movements, he believes, affect his life greatly. His readiness to accept negative circumstances as his lot in life stems from his feeling of helplessness in the face of these forces, both seen and unseen. And he is not alone.

Billie (not her real name) is a rural Arkansas mother, struggling to survive. Her husband’s work is seasonal. Consequently, financial solvency, regular nutritious meals, and sufficient clothing for the children are also seasonal – sometimes they do okay, sometimes they don’t. Their trailer home reflects the struggle. From the bare plywood floor in the kitchen to the threadbare black couch (actually gold velour covered in filth), to the stacks of useless junk that seem to be everywhere, this is the squalor this rural couple and their two unkempt children call home.

The visitor from school who had come to call watched compassionately as Billie slowly and deliberately wrote the name of her school-aged child as if it were a complicated mathematical formula. Billie appreciates the visitor’s help. She appreciates all offers of help. But deep down she doubts that her life will ever improve. She is not surprised by her circumstances. She has come to accept them as just the way things are.

I wonder if Jackson could relate to Billie better than I can? Would he know how to encourage her? Would he know what to say? Actually, I know what to say. I can encourage her by quoting Philippians 4:13: “I can do everything through him who gives me strength,” and support my optimism with Romans 8:31: “If God is for us, who can be against us?” The problem is not knowing what to say. The problem is whether or not I have earned the right to say it by experiencing its truth in my own life.

You see, most of us who are reading this publication are members of the same sociological stratum of society. Our worldview is similarly optimistic. When my wife is sick, I simply telephone the doctor – I can even reach him on his mobile phone if he’s not in the office – and make an appointment. In case of emergency, fine hospitals are only minutes away. I own the vehicle that will take her there and can afford the gasoline that powers it. Even if the visit is expensive, I have the means to pay for it or it will be paid for me. I will not be refused treatment for lack of money. So, when my wife is sick, I swing into action, confident that I am in control.

Christian optimism which is based on the sovereignty of God is a beautiful and hope-filled virtue which all Christians should experience regardless of where they live in the world. But sometimes what passes for Christian optimism is really a humanistic sense of control in disguise. Then a Billie comes along and challenges my basis for confidence without saying a word. She hears me speak of hope in Christ, but it’s easy to understand why she might look at me with eyes that say, “That’s easy for you to say.” And Billie is not alone. It may be an inner-city kid, or a homeless man, or an addict, or the child of divorce who stood helplessly by as his parents split up. It may

be the overworked executive who feels that his life is out of control and whose optimism has been devoured by the chaos. When we talk to such people it is important that we not promote one foundation for confidence while we're actually standing on another.

This is no ticket for a guilt trip. This is a call for an honest evaluation of where our confidence lies. Is it in our ability to control our world or is it in our confidence that God is the ruler regardless of what happens in our lives?

I believe the fire of renewal burns brightest and longest when it is fueled by an outward-looking sense of mission. As more and more churches target receptive people in our nation, they are finding that the search has taken them into sub-cultures made up of people who view the world very differently than most of us. Many of those people are fatalists. They don't think their lives will ever improve. For them there is not hope. The people of God must correct that. People ought not be fatalists. God can be trusted. God can help all people make changes in all areas of their lives that will improve the quality of life for them in this life and the next. But one of the most challenging things that will happen, as we optimists engage the world, will be that people like you and I will be challenged to consider more than ever before just where we get all of this confidence. Hopefully, we'll be able to check the ground beneath our optimism and find it labelled "nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness." Hope built on anything less is no place we want to be.

Getting Change Into Your System – Part 2

*by Lynn Anderson and Carey Garrett
November – December, 1993*

Last month's installment closed with the introduction of William Bridges' description of how organizational systems or congregations respond to change. Now we are exploring in greater detail his claim that endings, neutral zones, and new beginnings are essential to the transition process.

Ending

Some of my "change agent" attempts have fizzled because we "began" without "doing an ending." Bam! Just like that! This abrupt style is all too common in churches. So, how do congregational leaders "do an ending"? How do we "get the people out of Egypt"?

First, acknowledge their losses. Make sure people understand that you (the change agents) appreciate the significance of their losses. Ask, "Who is losing what?"

Second, compensate for the losses. What kind of trade-off can be offered. For example, in our church when the nursery pre-empted the space of Adults #2, Adults #2 got a classroom which, while less convenient, is much larger – a nice trade-off.

Another example: When our former church went to small groups on Sunday nights, some people felt a keen sense of loss; they simply did not feel right about not coming to the building for a service. So our elders formed a Sunday evening Bible study group at the church building for the "non-group group" to compensate for their loss.

Third, during "endings" people need a vision of what is ahead. "What might the promised land look like?" "What are the benefits of getting there?" This helps give people the confidence to make the leap.

Fourth, good change managers get people involved in the change and help them own part of the development of the vision, so they can see what it will be like "on the other side of the river." It also diminishes their fears since they retain some feeling of control over their destiny.

Fifth, during "endings" people need lots of information. Overkill is almost impossible. They need to know specifically what will and will not change.

Some change agents simply get frustrated with "X" and want change now, any change, to escape "X." So they push ahead and "cut a piece off the elephant," rather than "transitioning the system." They change things they don't like, before they know exactly what they do like; with no compelling rationale for the change and no clear picture of where the change will take us. Being

forced to leave home without a clear destination feels a lot like being kidnapped. People want to know the parameters and benefits. Change must be driven by a compelling, carefully planned, strategic rationale, not merely blind frustration. Again, information is crucial. As Carey Garrett says, “Think of the most information you could ever communicate and then triple that.” Information helps diminish the shock of “endings.”

Don’t forget that you, the change agent, may have progressed to “the neutral zone” or “new beginnings,” but other people may still be way back in “Egypt.” Maris underscores this in the following statement. Read it over carefully two or three times:

No one can resolve the crisis of reintegration on behalf of another. When those who have power to manipulate changes act as if they have only to explain, and when their explanations are not at once accepted, shrug off opposition as ignorance or prejudice, they express a profound contempt for the meaning of lives other than their own. For the reformers have already assimilated these changes to their purposes, and worked out a reformulation which makes sense to them, perhaps through months or years of analysis and debate. If they deny others the chance to do the same, they treat them as puppets dangling by the threads of their own conceptions.¹

Re-read that second sentence! If those in power “shrug off opposition as ignorance,” they show a *“profound contempt for the meaning of lives other than their own”* (emphasis supplied). Somehow the words, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” seem appropriate here!

Sixth, show how precious values will be preserved in spite of the change. Even secular organizations try to carry values through transitions. How much more important that Christian people feel confident their core values are not only being preserved through the changes, but that proposed change in their church will more effectively perpetuate, communicate, and apply the core values of the faith. When it comes down to it, the only valid reason to change things in a church is precisely to better preserve and perpetuate its core values!

When Israel was poised to cross the Jordan into the promised land, Joshua calmed their fears of the unknown by reminding them that the most important thing of all would not change. “When you see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, and the priests who are the Levites, carrying it, you are to move out from your positions and follow it. Then you will know which way to go, since you have never been this way before” (Joshua 3:3). In other words, “Get ready! Everything is going to change – except God. He is still our God, and we are still his people.”

Seventh, provide closure to what is ending through celebrations, ceremonies – even with symbolic gestures. For example, the new president of one corporation was making his company less hierarchical and more empowering. So, he called a news conference and personally painted out the president’s “reserved” parking spot. He circulated a video tape of the ceremony through all departments. This sent a strong “closure” signal.

Some kinds of closing ceremonies are old hat in churches. Funerals. Weddings, too, in a way. Graduation ceremonies. Going away parties. Bond burnings.

In one church where I served, the elders “relieved from her duties” a Sunday School supervisor with 20 years’ tenure. However, they designed a Sunday evening service in her honor, highlighted reminiscences from former co-teachers and students, and presented her with a plaque. This “ending ceremony” sweetened the bitter pill for her, and, at the same time, sent a clear “closure” message to the congregation.

The Neutral Zone

Scene two: The Wilderness Wanderings (or neutral Zone). Beginnings got the people out of Egypt. The neutral zone “gets Egypt out of the people.”

Of course, that in-between “neutral zone” time is usually a bit dangerous, but several strategies enable helpful “wandering” through our neutral zones.

First, during this time of instability and fear, there will be more need than ever for ample communication. But “neutral zone” communication must be more personal than “ending communication.” People will want to bend the ears of their leaders, so leaders will need to be “out and about,” available to people. William Bridges slightly modifies the Tom Peters’ concept of MBWA (Management By Walking Around) for the neutral zone – “Moses Been Walking Around.”

The neutral zone is not the time for leaders to hide from the “nay-sayers.” Rather it is a time to sit down around the coffee cup in Bible classes, back yards, and living rooms, involving all “constituencies” in the reflective and creative process of listening, dialoguing, clarifying – and yes, sometimes even modifying.

Second, in the neutral zone put temporary structures in place. You are no longer doing things like you did them in Egypt, and you’re not yet sure how you will do them in the promised land, so transitional structure helps stabilize things.

For example, 26 months ago our congregation totally revamped its way of appointing elders. Historically at Preston Road, the elders themselves had selected whomever they felt qualified, whenever they chose, simply by announcing their appointments to the congregation. But the congregation had changed. Approximately 80% had become members within the previous four years. So the elders, feeling they no longer represented “the new church,” threw the selection process to the entire church.

The “transitional structures” for the “neutral zone” were managed by two ad hoc committees of men and women from a cross-section of the congregation. The first committee designed a plan for congregational participation in elder selection. The second committee implemented the plan. But once the new elders were in place, the temporary ad hoc committees disbanded.

Third, in the neutral zone it was important for leaders to tap into the creativity within the group. People are breaking out of old ways and doing and seeing things. New insights may flourish. Creativity often soars. All the more reason for leaders to ask, listen, and empower during this phase of transition.

Warning: attempts to move too quickly through the neutral zone may build a trust and credibility deficit for leaders and run the risk of frightening people back into an even more resistant “old way,” just as the children of Israel “murmured” when Moses moved too fast for them, and begged to return to the “security” of slavery in Egypt. Leaders must be aware of where people are on the transition continuum in order to choose appropriate change strategies.

New Beginning

The last phrase is the new beginning as we “enter the Promised Land.” You are now moving into the new building. Or beginning the Sunday evening small groups. Or trading your song leader for a worship leading team, with contemporary music and without hymnals. Or you are shifting the Bible school from Sunday morning to Sunday night. Or the new preacher starts next Sunday. Life in the promised land!

What strategies are helpful now?

First, again, ample communication is needed. But people are now looking for information on what the future will look like. “Give me a detailed plan. What are the milestones? Exactly what is my new role?”

Second, build in small wins. Stop and celebrate any bit of concrete progress. This reassures supporters and helps bring along the skeptics.

Third, build in time-outs. People can only endure so much change at one time. Some leaders ignore this, to their regret. For example, one congregation launched into a laundry list of “eleven initiatives,” all equally important, all to be implemented at once. To avert disaster, wiser heads persuaded the change task force to back off and prioritize. Then after the implementation of each new “initiative” the church took a breather, celebrated the gains, and allowed people’s internal transitions to catch up.

Endings. Neutral Zones. New Beginnings.

An excellent example of healthy transition through these phases is the Highland Church of Christ in Abilene, Texas when, in 1990-91, they changed ministers. I had stood in the Highland pulpit for 19 very happy years, and I remained on staff for another year writing and doing church consulting. It was not a dismissal, nor a “forced resignation,” nor an “angry departure.” It simply seemed to Carolyn and me that God was bringing that chapter of our ministry to a healthy conclusion. Still, the transition out was very painful for me, Carolyn, and the congregation. However, the church moved through an unusually healthy year-long transition process.

The ending was formalized by three “ceremonies.” The first “ending ceremony” was the day I announced my resignation. Even now after more than three years, as I write these words, my eyes mist over and separation pain stabs my heart. I see the shocked expressions, tears, hugs, and of course, some denial – even some resistance. The second “ceremony” was a “going-away party” the church threw for us. After the morning service, we adjourned to the Family Life Center for a sort of “receiving line” of hugs, tears, and well-wishing, along with punch, cake, and

festivities. By this time, people were feeling less hurt and rejected. They were beginning to understand how this change could be positive.

The third “ceremony” was the Sunday morning I preached my last sermon at Highland. By this time most of us were adjusting to the reality of the ending. The day was still painful, but the “ending” had been “formalized,” and we had all been allowed time to “grieve our losses.”

Then came the neutral zone. For a year the church chose not to hire a new preacher. Several of the elders and some deacons did the preaching. Randy Becton, Glen Owen, Paul Faulkner, Charles Siburt, Jimmy Mankin, Tom Milholland, John Willis, Bruce Davis, Carroll Osburn, and others led throughout the “wilderness” year.

During that year, the Highland Church also did a thorough self-study, asking: “Who is the Highland church? Where are we going next? What kind of person do we want in our pulpit? Focus groups abounded. Rivers of communication flowed between the congregation and her leaders.

Then, a year later, when Mike Cope became their minister, the Highland church “ceremonialized” their “new beginning.” John Allen Chalk had served that church four years prior to my 20-year tenure. So Chalk and I were invited “back home” for a special “Mike Cope Ordination Sunday.” John Allen and I spoke brief messages and “handed the gavel” to Mike. The elders gave Mike a charge, laid hands on him, and ordained him as their new preacher.

After Mike’s response, the assembly was dismissed to a banquet in the Copes’ honor. Chalk and I each reminisced some humorous and touching pivotal moments from the past, as did several of the elders; Mike painted his dream for the future; and with fervent prayer, tears of nostalgia, and tears of joyful anticipation, the Highland church launched into its “new beginning.” Externally, Highland “changed” preachers, but much more importantly, they managed an internal transition in a very healthy and positive way.

Strategies That Apply Throughout All Stages

In addition to strategies peculiar to each of the three phases, some change strategies apply all across the process.

First, prayer. Both change agents and congregation must bathe deliberations in constant prayer.

Second, provide ample theological rationale for changes all through the process.

Third, constantly communicate the strategic benefits of proposed change.

Fourth, change only those things critical to the objectives of the church. Needless changes deplete your trust account and burn credibility needed for critical issues.

Fifth, continually assess. Be sure at each step that the church has the capability to make the proposed change.

Sixth, constantly nourish an environment of trust, collaboration, cooperation, openness, and learning.

Seventh, change leaders must consistently model the changes and thus re-enforce the new way. How not to model change: I pleaded for all staff members to “change,” and be punctual at meetings so as not to waste the time of others. Guess who was late to the next staff meeting?

In summary: Change is urgently needed in many churches; however, theological transition must precede tinkering with church systems. Change attempts will likely backfire without skilled management of change, and external change is only the tip of the iceberg. Below the waterline lurks the much weightier issue of internal transition. Effective transition is more likely if change leaders view churches as organic systems, like families, not collections of independent components.

Successful transition must negotiate three stages: endings, neutral zones, and new beginnings. Appropriate strategies during each of these phases vastly improve the likelihood of positive results.

But, attention please: one even more fundamental and indispensable ingredient must be in place – understanding the force and complexity of perceptions.

How People Resist Change

Effective church leadership must learn how to help congregations progress through these stages. No stage can be skipped or ignored. But not everyone passes through all stages at the same speed. If, for example, four people are all hit with a change at the same time, weeks later one may still be in the “ending,” another in the “neutral zone,” and one might have already reached the “new beginning.” Why the differences?

- Each person’s own personal tolerance for change. We are all wired differently.
- Each person’s perception of the value of the change.
- Each person’s perception of the value of the change.
- Each person’s perception of the way a change is being managed.

Change agents who ignore these personal differences court disaster. Unfortunately, sometimes church leaders even take the attitude that these resisters are “not very spiritual” or are even downright “mean,” which is not necessarily so. “These people” may simply be at a different transitional stage than are the leaders. A process of internal transition may have taken the change agent years, yet he or she may expect a church to switch in only a few weeks.

Remember: Each of these phases is normal, inevitable, and not to be by-passed.

There are some things that church leaders or change agents definitely cannot do. For example:

- They cannot change a person’s tolerance for change, which is inherent to each person’s unique make-up.

- They cannot force people to change. The “what we really need here is a bigger hammer” syndrom will lock up a system or “break” it. Remember, the harder you push, the harder the system pushes back.
- They cannot form people’s perceptions for them. The totality of past experience and current situation shapes perceptions. This makes perception personal, unique, and change-resistant.

Thus, the next issue and final installment in this “change” series will address “Changing Perceptions.”

1 P. Maris, *Loss and Change* (New York: Anchor Press / Doubleday, 1975).

AfterGlow: Preaching With or Without Words

by Phillip Morrison

November – December, 1993

John the Baptist, chosen by God to prepare the way for Jesus, was such a bold and fearless proclaimer that he gave his life rather than abandon his principles.

But there came a day when even John's certainty wavered while he languished in Herod's prison cell. He sent some disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"

Resisting whatever inclination he might have had to display his divine credentials or assert his doctrinal and personal purity, Jesus chose to talk about his concern for people: "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor" (Luke 7:18-22). We are not expected to duplicate Jesus' miraculous powers, but we are not excused from the obligation of being concerned about every human misery and preaching good news to the poor.

After two millennia, Jesus is still remembered for the force of such preaching as the Sermon on the Mount. But he is remembered even more as the loving Savior, one who cares, one who could shed tears with his friends, one who was sensitive to every touch and every shadow.

In Jesus' absence from the earth, God's people must preach the Christ who gives help and hope. Paul might have resented the fact that some were preaching the gospel out of envy, rivalry, selfish ambition, or other improper motives. "But what does it matter?" he asked. "The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice" (Philippians 1:15-18). As Peterson puts it: "I've decided that I really don't care about their motives, whether mixed, bad, or indifferent. Every time one of them opens his mouth, Christ is proclaimed, so I just cheer them on!"

Wineskins is dedicated to the proclamation of important things (See 1 Corinthians 15:3). That's why we don't answer every criticism or respond to every challenge. We prefer to keep as busy as we can, doing the best job we can to properly represent Christ in our world. This issue, by encouraging Christians to care about the poor and homeless, may come nearer to capturing the spirit of Christ than any we have ever done. We can't do everything Jesus did, but we can give cups of cold water in his name, comfort those left battered and bleeding by the wayside, campaign for social justice, and see that the poor have the good news preached to them.

Words have never been more plentiful or deeds more scarce. The proper relationship between the two is found in a statement attributed to St. Augustine: "Preach the gospel. If necessary, use words."

Phillip Morrison