

Shalom!

A JOURNAL FOR THE PRACTICE OF RECONCILIATION

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The Least of These

AS I'VE BEEN trying to navigate the political minefields in the United States coming into a highly fraught election year, I've been drawn to Jesus's parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25. We have generally interpreted this passage mostly in terms of our personal and perhaps congregational responses to people who are hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick, or in prison. When and how have we personally been Jesus or not been Jesus to the people in need among us?

Perhaps it is worth noting, however, that the parable is set in the time when "the Son of Man [Jesus] comes in his glory," and all the nations of the world are gathered around him. While Jesus separates the people from all the nations into sheep and goats, I've wondered if there is any significance to their also being part of individual nations. And then, I've wondered whether there is any application of the story Jesus tells to those nations. What would it look like if nations would minister to "the least of these" also?

During this election year, what if we measured candidates for public office according to how they propose to address human need with policies that address the real needs of the hungry, thirsty, stranger, sick, naked, and prisoner? Who best exemplifies a real desire and has plans to create a system that addresses food insecurity, provides access to clean water and affordable health care for all, develops just and empathetic immigration policies, builds affordable housing, and treats people who have

committed crimes fairly and compassionately? Which candidates care more about creating policies that embrace the kind of justice and compassion described in this parable in Matthew 25? Individual acts of mercy, absolutely essential as they are, don't always address the systemic issues that have helped to perpetuate poverty, hunger, access to clean water, and so on.

With all those questions in mind, I invited writers for this edition of *Shalom!* to write about personal and congregational ministries to "the least of these," and others who would address how changes in public policy could alleviate some of their long-term needs. Through the ten articles in this edition, I'm trying to suggest that practicing compassion as individuals and congregations AND advocating for changes in public policy are both important parts of being Jesus to "the least of these."

About a month ago as I write this, we again celebrated Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday. In 1968 in a speech at the National Cathedral, he said, "We shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." That arc is looking particularly long right now, and it's easy to despair that justice will never come. But Jesus's parable of the sheep and the goats gives us something of a roadmap for how we can help to bring about justice in our local communities and more broadly in and among nations.

Harriet S. Bicksler, editor

THIS ISSUE OF SHALOM!

Changing Systems to Serve the Least of These 2

An Anchor for Our Guests 3

A World Without Hunger 4

Compassion for People in Prison 5

Are We a Matthew 25 Church? 6

To Have a Home 7

MIDNIGHT MUSINGS

When You Saw Me Naked 8

Being Jesus to the "Strangers" Among Us 9

Finding a Warm Embrace 10

BOOK REVIEW

The Least of These 12

Changing Systems to Serve the Least of These

By Curtis Book

THE BIBLICAL IMPERATIVE of the law, the prophets, and Jesus is that faithful obedience requires God's people to love God and neighbor. This command is not an option; it's a biblical mandate. Jesus in his parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31ff is clear: by loving the least of these people, you love God and Jesus.

Therefore, we must care for the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, the stranger, the naked and the prisoner. The question then becomes, what are we doing individually and corporately to meet human need? Holistic aid needs to pour the oil of human kindness on both the cause and the effect of misery. Many times, we limit our local church efforts to such things as a food pantry, a health

clinic, or after school tutoring. These ministries are effective ways of addressing individual brokenness, but our mandate to love the least, the last, and the lost must also address the deeper systemic causes behind human suffering. Why are people hungry, thirsty, poor, and incarcerated? The answer needs to probe beyond individual acts of kindness to the broader systemic issues behind poverty and incarceration.

Allow me to share some of my story towards an understanding of the deeper systemic issues. As a missionary in both Africa and Latin America while doing pastoral leadership training for more than twenty years, I began to wrestle with the root cause of human suffering behind corporate sin. I began to ponder the reasons for the haves and have nots, the rich and the poor, the human egoism and tribalism that protect individuals and groups at the expense of others. Not only do bad individual choices cause human suffering, but also the systems into which people are born.

An eye opener for me was listening to African professionals who fled for their lives from white Rhodesia to London, England prior to Zimbabwe's independence in 1980. Many of them grew up in Brethren in Christ schools and churches, but they felt criticized by the church for engaging in opposition politics. The Brethren in Christ Church in Rhodesia tried to be apolitical in the independence struggle, but the feeling of these activists was that the Rhodesian government was based on white supremacy and injustice that did not have their interests at heart. Because I grew up as a boy in colonial Rhodesia, hearing this was eye-opening. For the first time in my life, I heard the story of those who were disenfranchised by the oppressive white government.

This led me to the conviction that part of my Christian duty is to listen to and understand the perspective of those who suffer even though I don't always agree. I started a journey whereby I resolved that faithful missional discipleship involves three steps: get near the pain, feel the pain, and then heal the

pain through Jesus Christ. These redemptive steps go beyond social justice to spiritual transformation of a new creation, but at the very least they form the basis for understanding the pain of human suffering.

We need more than knowledge, however, about the root cause of corporate sin. We must begin to address systemic evil if we are going to love the least of these. To do so, I quickly realized that we have to work with other Christians to heal the pain. This is why loving our neighbor can never be only individual acts of kindness. We must organize and work together as churches and denominations toward a collective response. Together we can make a difference. This is what advocacy is all about.

This reminds me of the Vietnam War and how the church responded. As the war dragged on, and the public became aware of the humanitarian crisis caused by the war, there were growing protests against the war including many students from Messiah College. At the time, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) was working in Vietnam seeking to address the humanitarian crisis. Protests and humanitarian assistance didn't seem to be enough. There was growing awareness that the root of the problem was the United States government's support of South Vietnam against the communist government of North Vietnam. The conviction that the church must do more to address the causes of the war led to the beginning of the MCC Washington Office in July 1968. MCC workers in Vietnam concluded that what they were doing was not particularly effective and perhaps hypocritical if they didn't also address the US involvement in the war. Many in the church realized that in order to love the least of these in Vietnam, they needed to speak out against the US government's foreign policy in Vietnam. Political advocacy is one of the responses Christians need to employ.

Remember the three steps: get near the pain, feel the pain, heal the pain. I am convinced that even if we are committed to loving our neighbor, we will never get far if we



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EDITOR

Harriet Sider Bicksler
127 Holly Dr.
Mechanicsburg, PA 17055
EMAIL: bickhouse@aol.com

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT

Eddie Asbury, Mechanicsburg, PA

DENOMINATIONAL LIAISON

Lynn Thrush, Tipp City, OH

EDITORIAL ADVISOR

Lois Saylor, Harrisburg, PA

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are distant from those who suffer systemic injustice. We must get near. We must be committed to not only learning their story but also feeling the effects of the injustices in their lives. What does the Scripture say: “Weep with those who weep, mourn with

those who mourn.” Then by working together with others, we will be able to heal the pain, pouring the oil of divine kindness and grace on the suffering caused by human sin and misery.

Curtis Book previously served as peace and justice coordinator for MCC East Coast and is currently the Africa regional administrator for Brethren in Christ U.S. World Missions. He and his wife attend the Lancaster (PA) Brethren in Christ Church.

An Anchor for Hungry and Unsheltered Guests

by *Patty Eastep*

AT ANCHOR LANCASTER, we are present every weekday morning to show the love of Christ while being an anchor in the lives of those who come to our door.

With a deeply rooted history in Lancaster City, Anchor Lancaster was started by a ladies Bible Study group at St. James Episcopal Church. After three decades of serving a continental breakfast to our hungry neighbors, the program relocated to First United Methodist Church just a short walk down the street. Within the first year at the new location the program became a private 501c3 nonprofit organization.

Fast forward seven years. . . . Kingdom work at Anchor Lancaster consists of serving a hot buffet breakfast every weekday morning, fifty-two weeks a year to anyone who is hungry. The kitchen offers an array of breakfasts, and the menu is varied and flavorful using the resources we obtain mostly from the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank.

In 2023, Anchor Lancaster received more than 60,000 pounds of food from the food bank. Favorites for our guests include scrambled eggs and fried potatoes with biscuits or toast. On average we crack and scramble 35-40 dozen eggs a day and use forty pounds of potatoes. Breakfast includes fruit, cereal, juice, milk, and of course coffee. Each morning eight to ten volunteers assist with preparing the meal, serving, and clean-up. Volunteers are the backbone of Anchor Lancaster, and we are grateful for more than sixty volunteers who gave 6,450 hours in the kitchen in 2023.

In the early years of Anchor Lancaster, order and discipline in the breakfast area was performed by a detective agency that felt like police/military discipline enforcers. There was tension among our guests. Now a new provider was hired who dresses in company

polo shirts and khaki slacks. The change in the atmosphere was immediate, and our guests benefit from a discipline that is offered with mercy and grace.

As we listened to our neighbors and learned about some of their hurdles, Anchor Lancaster began offering showers to our unsheltered neighbors two days a week. The shower program has since grown to a five-day-a-week program, offering 5,000 showers in 2023. Those who use the shower program are given a bath towel, wash cloth, a toiletry kit, and when available a new pair of socks, underwear, and a T-shirt.

Showers offer basic dignity and respect to our neighbors. Additionally, a warm shower allows our guests to present well at housing, employment, and medical appointments. We often see a lift in the spirits of our guests when they emerge from their shower. One guest told me after their shower, “Miss Patty, I feel like a real person again.”

In 2023, Anchor Lancaster saw a 17 percent increase in meals served and a 25 percent increase in showers, for a total of 35,000 meals and 5,000 showers.

Offering a warm safe haven, Anchor Lancaster opened a winter warming day center in 2021 for our unsheltered neighbors. During our first winter we provided services to two hundred unique individuals. Those who came were not only offered a safe, warm, and dry environment, but had use of a restroom, the opportunity to charge their phones and work with community service providers. A guest requested a pair of socks one cold, wet January day, which I was able to provide for her. She removed her boots and began peeling wet paper towels off her feet and slipped her feet into the dry socks. Small acts of kindness such as these are huge Jesus moments!!

In the summer of 2023, we also opened a summer day center, a place for our unsheltered neighbors to escape the summer heat. In 2023, we also welcomed our first case manager to our staff. During the first ten months, case management assisted 140 unique individuals with writing resumes, applying for employment, housing issues, transportation, and connecting to other needed services such as medical services and rehab facilities.

Anchor Lancaster does not just collaborate with multiple agencies within and around Lancaster County, but is itself an epicenter for various organizations to pool their knowledge, together for the betterment of our low-income and unsheltered guests. We are delighted to partner with a growing number of medical providers who are present at breakfast two or three days a week. Guests who are often leery of or unable to access medical care have the opportunity to see a medical professional in a familiar setting. Additionally, drug rehab service providers gather during the breakfast hours to offer assistance to our guests. A local hair stylist has also provided free haircuts to our guests multiple times. All of our weekday services are free to our guests.

Living out Matthew 25, Anchor Lancaster welcomes strangers to be our guests, providing for the hungry and the thirsty, while ministering to other essential needs.

Patty Eastep is a member of Branch and Vine, a Brethren in Christ congregation in Lancaster, PA.

A World Without Hunger

by Andrea Falano

WE LIVE IN the space between the world as it is and the world as it should be. That is a challenging tension to live in, and requires us to hold two truths. First, we must acknowledge, learn about, and understand the poverty that exists in our fallen world, and not numb or distract ourselves from it. Second, we must hold onto the hope of the Kingdom to come, including not giving up on working towards it now. In this space in between, we partner with God in his redemptive work.

For me, that is through advocacy with Bread for the World (“Bread”). Bread is a Christian advocacy organization that works to address hunger in the US and abroad through federal policy. Our mission is to educate and equip people of faith to advocate for policies and programs that can help end hunger.

Bread for the World was started almost fifty years ago by a pastor, Art Simon, whose church was feeding the hungry in the Lower East Side of New York City. Our current President, Pastor Eugene Cho, describes Simon’s vision well: “the three ideas he had in the founding of Bread: To prevent hunger from happening in the first place rather than just reacting to it; to work within the system of American democracy to ensure political leaders hear about hunger from their constituents; and to organize Christians to speak up collectively against hunger.”

At Bread, we envision a world without hunger. That is the picture of the world as it should be. But how about the world as it is? We know that there is more than enough food produced in the world to feed everyone on the planet, and yet, as many as 783 million people go hungry world-wide. The US is not immune from the issue of hunger. According to the USDA, in 2022, 17.3 percent of households with children in the US were food insecure, with 18.5 percent of children themselves food insecure. That equates to more than seven million children.

The term food insecurity is an official way to label hunger, and it means that the ability of a person to acquire adequate food is lim-

ited, with uncertainty over where the next meal will come from. The numbers are staggering at a global and national level, but it can be even harder to know that food insecurity exists in our own communities. All fifty states, all 435 congressional districts, and all 3,143 counties have people who experience food insecurity. As churches, I encourage us to know our communities well. What are the struggles our neighbors are facing? Who is experiencing hunger? What does poverty look like in our area, and what are some of the causes of it?

And then, let’s work to feed those people. At Bread, we like to think of direct service as one foot, and advocacy as the other. We can meet people’s needs locally through direct meals, and we can advocate to effect change in the systems around us to ensure more people are fed.

US policies and programs impact the lives of people in the US and in every corner of the world. An example of legislation is the Farm Bill, a large, multifaceted piece of legislation that helps shape local, regional, national and global food systems, and Bread advocates for a Farm Bill that builds healthy, equitable, and sustainable food systems.

One of my favorite programs in the Farm Bill is the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (“GusNIP”). It doubles up a person’s food benefits when used to purchase fresh fruit and vegetables, and is especially used at farmers’ markets. Not only has this program had proven results on the amount of healthy food a person consumes, but it also changes the local food systems and creates access to healthy foods. Many areas experiencing poverty lack access to nutritious food, what we call “food deserts.” GusNIP incentivizes farmers’ markets to come to certain areas they wouldn’t otherwise, for farmers to participate in those markets, and for farmers to continue to grow those healthy foods.

GusNIP is a proven example of how advocacy works. Bread representatives have educated their representatives on this program and asked them to support it, with the end

result of having strong support across the political spectrum. We get to witness true bipartisan cooperation take place in order to feed people.

The relationship between advocacy and faith is often discussed in two ways: we are motivated by our faith to engage in advocacy, and Christians can bring benefit to public spaces through advocacy. Both of these things are true, but I think they miss the heart of the matter. Advocacy is discipleship, and our engagement with it should transform our hearts and our character to more align with Christ. As we come alongside the oppressed and the outcast of society, as Jesus did, we should be moved by them, learn about God’s love through them, and love them ourselves as Jesus does. Indeed, if we engage in political action or advocacy, and we do not have love for our neighbor and our community and the “least of these,” our words are only “a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.”

While Bread is ecumenical, for me it is our Brethren in Christ identity that creates the space for me to engage in this work. I can be firmly rooted in the understanding that my obedience is to Christ Jesus as King, not a political party, but I can also take seriously the call of Jesus to step into spaces of poverty and engage in work to redeem our systems and community. I can follow Jesus’s words to feed the hungry, but also know that Jesus is the Bread of Life.

Andrea Falano is the state organizer for Bread for the World of Pennsylvania. She attends the Meeting House—Carlisle.

Compassion for People in Prison

By Laura Pauls-Thomas



LAMAR OBERTON, MEMBER of Freedom Church in Philadelphia, came to a Martin Luther King Jr. Service Day event in Philadelphia to honor her brother, who is in prison.

Mass incarceration was the focus of the event, sponsored by Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) East Coast and Kingdom Builders Network (KBN). Participants packed 560 care kits for incarcerated men and women and listened to a panel of experts talk about medical and mental health issues in Philadelphia prisons.

“I really find a passion in my heart to give to those who are struggling,” said Oberton. “It’s important to me to be here because when I see these people [volunteering], I think of my brother.”

ChiChi Oguekwe, Philadelphia program coordinator for MCC East Coast and coordinator of the seventh annual event, said, “There are so many individuals and families who are impacted by incarceration. This is an opportunity to remind them that we have hope for them and that we care about them.”

Janice Barbour, member of Christian Stronghold Baptist Church in Philadelphia, said that she was looking online for opportunities to serve locally and prayed for God to lead her to the right MLK (Martin Luther King Jr.) event.

“I have a difficult time with this whole prison industrial complex, from the point of being a victim of crime to being related to people who have been incarcerated. It’s just so multifaceted, and I struggle with how to really be useful in it . . . so, I think that’s why God directed me here.”

MCC shares Barbour’s concern about mass incarceration in the US—the substantial rise in incarceration rates since the late 1960s. The US is home to 5 percent of the world’s population and 25 percent of its prisoners. Nationwide, more than two million people are contained in US prisons and jails—an increase of 500 percent the last forty years, according to the Sentencing Project.

Philadelphia event panelists spoke about the need for medical and mental health justice in Philadelphia prisons, where they described the difficulty of long lockdowns and barriers to accessing hygiene items, showers, books and the law library due to short-staffing. They said conditions are unsanitary and unsafe, especially for those with documented health conditions and disabilities.

They also presented tangible solutions, including encouraging churches to nurture the leadership skills of formerly incarcerated people who are returning home. They urged individuals to educate themselves, vote in elections, and do their research on candidates. They also called for an end to cash bail, funding for community groups, and requirements for law enforcement officers to live within the same communities they police.

In Philadelphia and in other US locations, MCC walks with communities who have been targeted by the mass incarceration system, working toward healing, justice, and

restoration. MCC also provides care for those in prison and those returning to society by providing kits with basic clothing and hygiene supplies. This is part of MCC’s mission to share God’s love and compassion for all in the name of Christ.

In Elkhart, Indiana, MCC’s Great Lakes region partners with the Center for Community Justice by providing coaching and mentorship to men and women who are currently or formerly incarcerated. MCC Great Lakes also partners with other organizations in Elkhart, Chicago, Illinois, and Lexington, Kentucky to support people affected by incarceration.

In Kansas, MCC’s Central States region partners with Working Men of Christ by providing returning citizen care kits and with Offender Victim Ministries by providing prisoner care kits. These kits help meet the basic needs of those who are incarcerated or are turning to their communities.

“Going through the [prison] system, it often feels as if you’re going through it alone, and so this is a really special day for me,” says Jeffrey Abramowitz. He was incarcerated in a federal prison for five years and now serves as the chief executive officer of the Petey Greene Program, an educational program that helps people inside and outside prison to reach their academic and professional goals. Joining with others to pack the women’s prison care kits impacted Abramowitz the most.

He said, “Just seeing those little things [like feminine products] on the table really struck home because those are the things that can make a difference in somebody’s life that you may never see.”

Several youth groups from Mosaic Mennonite Conference congregations attended this year’s event. For Andrew Zetts, associate pastor at Salford Mennonite Church, in Harleysville, Pennsylvania, this was his second year in a row attending with youth from his congregation.

“As a suburban congregation it’s really easy for us to lose sight of those in need,” Zetts said. “[We’re] trying to pierce that bubble for a lot of our youth who have only



Volunteers from Circle of Hope Church (Brethren in Christ) hand items to participants who move through the assembly line. Photo/Kris J. Eden.

restoration. MCC also provides care for those in prison and those returning to society by providing kits with basic clothing and hy-

grown up in a certain context, to try to get them to see a bigger picture of the world and also to see the church in action.”

For Esther Hong, an MCC International Volunteer Exchange Program (IVEP) participant from Cambodia, a sense of community and belonging was a valuable part of the event. She attends Plains Mennonite Church, Lansdale, Pennsylvania, with her host family.

She said, “I’ve always been interested in

doing [community building and peacebuilding] ministry, and so it’s amazing to be part of this event. Being part of this event felt like home—coming together and doing something with your community.”

Jay Bergen, pastor of Germantown Mennonite Church, highlighted the importance of the community gathering for the event.

“Scripture commands us to remember those who are incarcerated as if we are chained to them (Hebrews 13:3). It’s too easy for those

of us who have not been incarcerated, or not had family members who are incarcerated, to feel like the justice system is something ‘out there.’ In reality, it fundamentally shapes our society. We are called to be followers of the Prince of Peace and act for peace in situations of violence.”

Laura Pauls-Thomas is communications director MCC East Coast.

Are We a Matthew 25 Church?

By Jonah Langenderfer

THERE ARE MANY hungry people in our world who should not be, and so many in power are to blame. What is the church to do? How can we successfully advocate for policy change so the government will do what needs to be done to feed the hungry? To get to the center of the right response for an overwhelming issue, the church needs to hear afresh and embody in our life together Jesus’s message in his story of the coming judgment on the sheep and the goats:

One day the King will return to judge the nations; and he will separate them as sheep and goats. The King’s judgment on the sheep will be: “Come, you who are blessed. For I was hungry, and you gave me food.” But the sheep will ask: “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you?” The King will reply: “When you fed one of the least of these siblings of mine, the truth is: you were feeding me.” The King’s judgment on the goats will be: “Depart from me, you who are cursed. For I was hungry, and you gave me nothing.” The goats will ask, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and not feed you?” The King will reply: “When you did not feed one of the least of these siblings of mine, the truth is: you did not feed me.” Then the goats will go away to eternal punishment, but the sheep to eternal life” [author’s abbreviated paraphrase].

So what is Jesus’s message? I believe that Jesus is not talking to nations but to individual people, based on their unconscious treatment of him through their conscious

treatment of the “least of these,” who are either Jesus’s poor missionaries or maybe poor disciples, but not any poor person in general. The Gospel has created a community so reconciled to God and one another that members of God’s family who have food will do whatever it takes to feed others (and mysteriously, Christ) who are hungry.

This interpretation appears to be less relevant to discussion on needed policy changes on behalf of poor people, and there are examples of wrong-headed use of this passage to justify ignoring the poor outside the church. Not only do I think that this is the best interpretation of a debated passage, I think carefully listening to the Word here invites the Church to look inward first; in other words, before we reflect on the “speck of sawdust” of needed systemic changes in society, let’s take a look inward first to the “plank” in the eye of the Brethren in Christ Church filled with “rich Christians in an age of hunger” (to use Ronald J. Sider’s famous book title). Are we a missionary people of Jesus, like one of the first missionaries who for the sake of the gospel endured hostility from the world’s powers and had often “known hunger and thirst . . . and been cold and naked” (2 Cor. 11:27)? This is the “policy” given to us by Christ in this story.

So often our churches on the “right” of the political spectrum ignore the poor or those on the “left” try to enact some type of government policy to create social change, without first being the church that receives Christ’s work in us to radically embody this

social change as a witness to an alternative Kingdom that challenges both the world and the church. Anabaptist theologian Stanley Hauerwas similarly critiques this when he describes Peter Maurin, the founder of The Catholic Worker, who did not believe that the works of mercy in this passage “were a strategy to care for the poor until another and better more effective social policy could be found. . . . Works of mercy were the social policy that Jesus had given his people for the renewal of the world.” Hauerwas also notes, “Dorothy Day calls this understanding of the works of mercy a scandal because it challenges the assumption that Christians are to do something for the poor by trying to create alternatives to capitalism or socialism. The problem with [this] is that we seduce ourselves into believing that we are working to feed the hungry . . . without knowing anyone who is hungry. . . .”¹

There is a remarkable example in Brethren in Christ history of when we did appear to respond to Christ’s message by becoming a hungry people ourselves in order to feed our hungry global siblings: we established the World Hunger Fund in 1974 as a multi-year fast to reduce household food and expenses and share the excess with our global brothers and sisters. After we respond this way and embody a Matthew 25 alternative community, this is not only faithful to Jesus, but may also raise the credibility of our corporate and individual advocacy for policy change for people who are hungry.²

Where today are “apostles” among the

Brethren in Christ embodying Christ's message to the point of being hungry, unwelcomed, unclothed, sick, or imprisoned? Matthew 25 invites us not to overlook radical stories happening in our own backyard.

Here's a story a bit different from our historic white Anabaptist church's political witness. For over a decade, one of the pastors in the Great Lakes Conference has been representing Christ in an overlooked story of "good trouble." Tracie Hunter, pastor of Western Hills Brethren in Christ Church in Cincinnati, was elected as the first female black juvenile court judge in Hamilton County, Ohio. She sought and accomplished justice in her community where systemic racism contributed to imprisoning and mistreating countless black youth. She was then pushed out by those in power and unjustly jailed; she was "visited in prison" and "given a cup of cold water" by our former bishop,

John Zuck, and our current bishop, Lynn Thrush, who has joined her in fighting for her justice and integrity ever since.³ Recently, after a ruling enabling Pastor Tracie to restore her law license, the "nations" asked for a statement. From a Matthew 25 Kingdom lens, this press conference was a fascinating reversal of judgment—rather than Tracie being on trial, she put the nations on trial and was defended and supported by her bishop and fellow pastors.

Perhaps this is a foreshadowing of the judgment on "nations" because they bullied the King's little sister Tracie. Jesus's story offers good news of promised vindication for people like Tracie, but also a warning of the judgment to come and a call to look inward. Are we nervous for this coming judgment: "when you did not feed one of the least of these siblings of mine, the truth is, you did not feed me."

Notes:

¹Stanley Hauerwas, commenting on Dorothy Day's essay "The Scandal of the Works of Mercy," in *Matthew: Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Ada, MI: Brazos Press, 2015).

²The Brethren in Christ World Hunger Fund continues in a different form. It is now known as the Global Compassion Fund, operates a bit differently, but still shares with our global brothers in sisters who are in dire circumstances. See <https://partnership.bicus.org/project/global-compassion-fund/>.

³To read more and support Pastor Tracie Hunter, see <https://traciehunterlegaldefensefunds.com>. See also the video of Bishop Lynn Thrush's introduction and Pastor Tracie's statement to the press at <https://www.facebook.com/1600062586/videos/3130998780528707/>.

Jonah Langenderfer is pastor of the Pleasant Hill (OH) Brethren in Christ Church.

To Have a Home

By Jean Keller Thau

JESUS TELLS US that the poor will always be with us. Does that provide us with an excuse to look the other way? It is clear from Matthew 25:31-46 that this is not the case. We have somehow developed blinders that allow us to avoid the realities of our world that make us uncomfortable. One of those realities is homelessness.

On her way to work, Karen Olson passed a woman who was homeless. She stopped and bought her a sandwich. Through that single act of kindness, a relationship began that removed her blinders. Karen began to explore how she could reach out with more than just a sandwich. So began Family Promise in 1986 with the opening of its first affiliate, going national in 1988. From that one sandwich, Family Promise currently has over two hundred affiliates across the country because of one woman's desire to provide a "hand-up" not a "hand-out" to people experiencing homelessness.

On a national level, Family Promise advocates for governmental legislation that has the potential to effectively address homelessness. Four of those pieces of legislation include:

1. The Emergency Family Stabilization Act that would create new emergency funding streams that would be administered by the Administration for Children and Families within the US Department of Health and Human Services. This would provide flexible funding for community-based organizations to meet the unique needs of children, youth, and families experiencing homelessness in the wake of the coronavirus.

2. The Homeless Children and Youth Act (HCYA) advocates for the passage of and for modifications to the way the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines homelessness.

3. The Eviction Crisis Act (S. 3030) would establish a federal emergency housing assistance grant program that would provide aid to people experiencing housing insecurity in order to avert homelessness, according to the National Alliance to End Homelessness.

4. The Family Stability and Opportunity Vouchers Act is, according to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, a bill that would create an additional 500,000 housing vouchers specifically designed for low-income families with young children in order

to expand their access to neighborhoods of opportunity with high-performing schools, strong job prospects, and other resources.

Family Promise Harrisburg Capital Region (FPHCR), serving the Central Pennsylvania area, became one of the affiliates of Family Promise National in July 2010. My home church, Dillsburg Brethren in Christ, became one of FPHCR's first hosting sites. FPHCR serves homeless families with children through an Interfaith Hospitality Network (IHN). The IHN partners with local communities of faith, businesses, community leaders and volunteers. These partnerships provide resources that allow families to move from "homelessness to home." Currently, they provide additional resources through Heads Up, providing mental health support; Wheels Up, providing help with transportation; Move Up, providing rental assistance; and the Road to Success, a partnership with United Way providing job counseling and support for individuals. These programs allow FPHCR to embrace Jesus's call in Matthew; "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger

and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me. . . .”

Most importantly, FPHCR values the family. Their desire is to provide a safe place where a family can address the challenges of homelessness and move back into permanent housing while keeping their family intact. This can only be accomplished through numbers of individuals and organizations removing their blinders. A handful of people cannot do this alone. It takes a community of individuals and organizations who understand the need to walk together, providing the necessary resources to these families while allowing them to maintain their dignity.

The task can seem overwhelming. We only see the surface when we consider homelessness to be folks who are sleeping in tents, on sidewalks, on park benches, in cars. In reality, there are numbers of individuals and families who are staying in rundown, cheap, often roach-infested hotels because they can't

afford a security deposit and first month's rent, have bad credit, or are moving from one friend/family member's home to another. Their children have no permanent address and have difficulty achieving in school. We have developed the misconception that these folks just need to get a job but, in many cases, they have a job that doesn't provide enough income to survive in our competitive society and no opportunity to get the training they need to move into a job with potential advancement. These are the underserved and unseen people all around us who have no home.

Family Promise provides an opportunity for individuals and organizations to connect together in partnership in order to begin to address these issues. We can only begin to put a dent in the homeless crisis in our country when we are willing to reach out to the person in front of us. FPHCR provides an opportunity for us to do just that. In order to continue the work, we must be willing to take off our blinders and step forward with a

willingness to serve one another. I have received no greater blessing than the one of watching a family walking a difficult and challenging journey of homelessness hold up the keys to their new home—a place for a new beginning. I would not have had that opportunity if my home church had not stepped forward to serve as a host site for FPHCR, and I had not been given the opportunity to volunteer and serve.

You can find additional information regarding Family Promise National at www.familypromise.org and Family Promise Harrisburg Capital Region at www.familypromisehcr.org.

Jean Keller Thau serves on the board of Family Promise of Harrisburg Capital Region. She attends the Dillsburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church, where she previously served as associate pastor.

When You Saw Me Naked

By Zach Spidel

THE WEATHER WAS about as nasty that day as we ever get here in Dayton, Ohio. It was winter and right about freezing temperature. Thirty-two degrees isn't so bad if it's dry and you've got a layer or two of clothing on, but that day wasn't dry and the woman who came stumbling across the church yard just then was not wearing any layers.

It was a Friday, the day our church, with several partner organizations, provides various sorts of help to our neighbors. The church operates a pantry out of our garage and a clothing closet out of our basement. A partner organization prepares and serves so many hot meals here that they have to use our kitchen along with a mobile unit they bring in to cook it all. A friend from the neighborhood gives away toiletries from the back of her truck in the parking lot, while a local addiction ministry sometimes sets up a tent where they distribute Narcan, counsel, prayer, and connections to recovery options.

Sleet was falling steadily from the sky and the slushy stuff was soaking everything while

a stiff breeze made the damp that much more miserable. I was outside checking on something or other—I can't remember what. What I do remember is the sight of this woman as she came walking from Third St. across the church yard toward me. It took me a few moments to fully register what I was seeing. Our neighbor was wearing a t-shirt, and only a t-shirt. No pants, no sweater, no coat. She was holding herself as she walked, stooped over, her shoulders heaving. She started calling out half-way across the yard, a kind of moan, "Help me, I need help."

Her face was pocked with the sort of marks I recognize all too well now—wounds that open up in the flesh of certain drug users binging on bad stuff, who pick the sores open each time they begin to heal. She had slept in a tent just a block and a half away the night before, but all her clothing was soaked.

I only got those details from her later. What I and those with me that day did first was to get her in out of the cold. One of my Christian sisters standing there with me



practically cried out when she saw our neighbor coming, "Oh honey! Come here, come inside. We have to get you dry!" Our neighbor nodded violently, and let my sister lead her by the elbow into the church and down the steps to the basement. She took her straight to the women's bathroom, while I went and fetched another sister. "Can you grab some towels and bring them over to the women's room and then help get her some clothes and food?"

That's all I did, but the sisters went to work. Over the next hour or so, when I'd go through the basement on the kind of rounds I make on Fridays, I'd catch glimpses of our neighbor. I saw her next sitting with a cup of something hot, covered in blankets while various bits of clothing were held up for her,

“Would you like this one? What about this?”

A little while later I saw her dressed, her face washed, her eyes brighter and sharper, seated at a table next to one of the sisters. She wasn't talking, though; she was too busy eating the food set before her. Lastly, I saw her dressed in a long red frock-style winter coat. Her hair was pulled back, her shoulders relaxed; it was hard to believe this was the same woman from before. It was then that I got to talk to her a little bit, to hear about the tent and her boyfriend and the soaked clothes. We asked what more we might do. She didn't want treatment and wouldn't go to the shelter, so we did what we could. We grabbed sleeping bags and blankets and extra clothes and lots of extra food, and we drove her the block and half to the tent she was staying in with this new passel of goods.

Before we left, I asked if we could pray with her. She nodded and I prayed with a

hurting heart for God to help her. I prayed she would take his help, run from the drugs that had a hold on her and the people who only wanted to hurt her, and that she'd run toward God and those who helped her that day. I told her I really hoped to see her Sunday for breakfast at the church. She said she'd come, but she never did. In fact, I've never seen that woman again. I went looking for her a week later, but the tent was gone. I was saddened but not surprised; this is a painfully typical experience for us here.

Why do it then, some might wonder? We do not serve those who are desperately needy this way because we believe we have the power to fix their brokenness. We do not do it because we see ourselves as a social service agency. We do not do it because the measurable results are regularly encouraging. We do it because we love Jesus and this is how he comes to us—nearly naked and shivering in

the sleet, his face pocked with sores, his eyes filled with tears. We cannot turn our Lord away. We love and serve because he first loved and served us. We do not think in terms of efficacy or efficiency. We give, we pray, and we set our hope in God's promises. Chief among those that keep me going: nothing done for Jesus is ever done in vain. Wherever our neighbor is now, I pray she is well and that she remembers that day still as a sign of God's great love for her. I pray that the beautiful coat we gave her, which was no doubt ruined soon after, became more than a coat. I pray that it was the seed of a salvation that I will get to see when I greet that woman again, if not in this age, then in the age to come

Zach Spidel is pastor of East Dayton Fellowship, a Brethren in Christ congregation in Dayton, OH.

Being Jesus to the “Strangers” Among Us

By Julie Weatherford

THE IMMIGRATION CRISIS in the US has been long term and overwhelming, so it's hard to wrap one's head around the ever-shifting causes, issues, and problems or to sense that progress has been made to prevent further harm. Regardless, the people of my church, Madison Street Church, have tried to center our work around following the ways of Jesus, so care about the immigration crisis and for immigrants has naturally joined the list of other peace and justice efforts to which we've sensed God's call. Some of our efforts have been hands-on with local immigrants, some have focused on more distant efforts, and some have advocated for more just immigration policies. As I write about our efforts, I begin with the admission that, although they've been made with what we've hoped are Jesus-like love and compassion for migrants, they don't seem like much in light of the immensity of the problems, and they pale in comparison to what other churches have done.

Many are the theological underpinnings of our belief that, as an outgrowth of desire to follow Jesus, we should care about mi-

grants. The Old Testament is replete with God's instructions to his people to welcome and provide for needs of “strangers” migrating en route elsewhere or settled within their communities. God visited our planet as a human baby who spent his earliest years as a member of a poor migrant family that had to flee for safety to a foreign country. Older and back in Palestine, a member of an oppressed people in an occupied land under the dictatorship of a powerful empire, Jesus's lifestyle of reaching with love across dividing lines of his time, his example of connecting with vulnerable people, and his teachings about compassionately loving and serving all people make it clear that his followers are to do likewise. His familiar sheep-and-goats parable of Matthew 25 is just one way he underscored that God is pleased when nations and people respond to “the stranger” with welcome and compassionate aid.

Our church is in Riverside, a city of about 325 thousand in Southern California. A two-hour drive from the US-Mexico border, we enjoy a Hispanic population of 55 percent.* While many belong to families that

have lived in the area for decades, and a good number are descendants of indigenous people groups that have lived in California for centuries, some are new or relatively new arrivals who have endured dangers unimaginable to most of us: unlivable and dangerous situations in their home countries, long and dangerous travel by foot, dishonest “coyote” guides, imprisonment and family separations at the border, dangerous border towns, etc.

Riverside is also home to various other migrants/refugees, many from Afghanistan. There has been a small but steady flow for the last decade, followed by a large influx since August 2021 when US troops pulled out, the Taliban took control, and Afghans fled for the relative safety and freedom of the US. Most arrived with only the possessions they carried, deep grief over the loss of beloved family and country, PTSD from what they endured, and hope for a better life.

Here are some ways Madison Street Church has become involved in caring about immigrants and the immigration issue:

- For most of the last decade, we have partnered with the Human Migration Insti-

tute (formerly Globally Connected), a local non-profit organization that provides support to refugees, particularly Afghan refugees. Lasting bonds of friendship have resulted. Some of us Madison Street people have been involved with HMI's ESL (English as a Second Language) program, started in another local church's building and now meeting at Riverside's Islamic center. Some have provided transportation for Afghan women and children to ESL classes and accompanied them to medical appointments. Others have, either individually or in partnership with other churches, provided fresh produce for Afghan families in need. From time to time, HMI staff and local refugees have been the speakers in our Sunday morning gatherings. We've collected and distributed needed household items for newly arriving Afghan families and, this past fall, a couple of our women coached an Afghan woman through labor and delivery. One of the women opened her home for this needy mother and baby to stay for a couple months.

• Before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Madison Street's Radical Hospitality/Immigration Action group met on Sunday mornings, convinced that, as Jesus-followers, it was important for churches to

respond compassionately to the ongoing crisis at the US-Mexico border. The woman who facilitated the group (a member of the church) accessed and provided materials for us to become better educated about the issue and the current situation. A couple group members organized church-wide donations of items to go into refugee kits for recent migrants staying at a shelter in Arizona before moving on. Some of us joined with a local church's food distribution program primarily serving Hispanic individuals and families regardless of immigration status.

Our group connected with MCC US's National Peace and Justice Ministries (formerly MCC Washington Office). NPJM's goal is to educate Anabaptists and policy makers about peace and justice issues in order to encourage more welcoming communities and a more peaceful and just world. For years, our church had publicized and participated in NPJM's letter-writing campaigns to legislators and, in the fall of 2019, NPJM responded to our group's invitation for a staff person to visit to help us learn about and advocate for just immigration policies. NPJM's Tammy Alexander graciously connected with and educated our church on a Sunday morning about the immigration crisis at our

southern border. Giving the best slide presentation I've ever witnessed, Tammy also helped us prepare for a visit the next day to the local office of our US Congressman, and she accompanied a dozen of us as we advocated for specific legislation on behalf of more just immigration policies.

• Aware that almost no one wants to leave family, friends and home country to make a dangerous trek and transition to a new place, we've supported efforts to improve conditions in other countries so people are not forced to uproot and flee. With this in mind, we have long appreciated the work of Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). Via financial giving, fundraisers, kit drives, relief sales and board work, the people of Madison Street Church have joined in MCC's work to alleviate suffering and reduce the need to migrate, as well as to lend relief and support to refugees.

We've felt privileged to be able to partner with others to participate in these small ways in God's work of welcome, advocacy and care for immigrants.

Julie Weatherford is one of the founding members of the Madison Street Church (Brethren in Christ) in Riverside, CA.

Finding a Warm Embrace

By Adam Jones

IN THE SUMMER of 2003, while I was at Asbury Theological Seminary, I sensed the Lord calling me to mission work. So, to get more experience and discernment, I went to work at Wayside Homeless Shelter in Louisville. I served food and did chalk drawings with kids. One day as I left, the Holy Spirit spoke clear as day: Can you tell me the name of one person? I couldn't. I was serving the "least of these," but I didn't care to know them. Since becoming a pastor, God has brought this experience to mind many times.

Shane Claiborne says in his book *Irresistible Revolution*: "Almost every time we talk with affluent folks about God's will to end poverty, someone says, 'But didn't Jesus say, 'The poor will always be with you?'" Many of the people who whip out this verse

have grown quite insulated and distant from the poor and feel defensive. I usually gently ask, 'Where are the poor? Are the poor among us?'"

Those words rang true for me. The church I serve, Open Door, has worked to become a community where the least of these find a warm embrace. In doing so we have met folks like Judy. Here is part of her story:

In April of 2003, I lost my husband. My name is Judy and I am the Granny of Open Door. I love my home. I have been there seventeen years. There is always a seat on my porch swing for anyone that comes by. In addition to losing the man of my life, I was now responsible for all the bills on one income. This was a really

hard change. I make just over \$800/month, but my house payment is over \$500 per month. After food and utilities, I don't have much left for unexpected expenses. My house is winterized, but it is also over sixty years old. Sometimes I can't pay my utilities in the winter months."

How do we help Granny Judy when no amount of giving will reduce rising costs?

Open Door Church served in Ingleside Mobile Home Park. It was one of the poorest housing locations in our city. We had come to respect and love our neighbors there. Marie was a kind, gentle elder who lived with her son. Sarah worked hard while supporting her three daughters as a single mom. Mary was a strong, loving mother who lived in the

mobile home with her husband and six children. Several families had joined Open Door. Then one day, the owner decided to sell the land to an apartment developer. The 250 plus families had sixty days to vacate. The problem was they had been paying \$300 for rent and we couldn't find any comparable rents in the city. Many ended up like Judy, with ever rising rents and bills with flat or decreasing incomes. We felt powerless to help. We couldn't pay everyone's rent. The housing market was insufficient and unjust for the working poor.

Thankfully, our church was a member of BUILD (Building a United Interfaith Lexington with Direct action), a community organizing group that uses the power of organized, faithful people to change policy in our city. We, along with twenty-five other congregations, interviewed hundreds of our members and found that lack of affordable housing was a city-wide problem. In fact, through our research from 2008-2011, we discovered that one in four families could not afford their rent in Lexington. We also found through a market research study funded by the city that Lexington was losing four hundred units of affordable housing each year. A permanent renter underclass had

become a reality.

BUILD researched what other cities had done and found a tool that could increase the supply of affordable housing: an Affordable Housing Trust Fund.

For seven years, our churches gathered hundreds of people at our Nehemiah Action each spring. Granny Judy shared her story in front of our city mayor and over a thousand people and asked our mayor to put an Affordable Housing Trust fund of \$2 million into the city budget to address the housing crisis. For six years, the mayor told us no. Then, in 2015, I stood before Mayor Gray on the stage of Immanuel Baptist Church, and I asked the same question for a seventh year: Will you put an Affordable Housing Trust fund in the city budget in the amount of \$2 million?

He said yes.

The Affordable Housing Trust Fund has worked so well in Lexington that our council increased it to \$5 million this past year. Thousands of affordable units have been created.

For 20 years, these twenty-six congregations have worked through this same process of listening to our neighbors' needs and working for just action in our city. As a result,

today we have a drug rehabilitation program for women in jail, restorative justice in our courts, better bus routes, mental health court funding, and several other city programs that help our neighbors.

This work does not stem from some political agenda we have. This work grows from the people we love, like Granny Judy. We pursued mental health court because Sherri would have gone to jail over and over without a court that understood her illness. We are currently working to get public affordable microtransit in Lexington because Charlie has one lung, an oxygen tank, and cannot drive. He cannot wait three hours for his pickup because our current system is so broken. I think "the least of these" long for churches that want to know their names, and who listen to their stories and love them well. Matthew 25 reminds me that those living on the margins should find the church right there beside them, sharing in their struggle, calling them by name, and working toward the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

Adam Jones is pastor of Open Door Church (Brethren in Christ) in Lexington, KY.

continued from page 12

lament protest over an injustice and work to support social change to benefit those facing systemic issues. Understanding your local community will bring multiple ways that your congregation can help.

In these efforts we want to remember the relational aspects of helping and not neglect the mutuality of what we do. Helping as the community issues out of respect for people, for all are made in God's image and loved by him. It is his lead we follow in knowing who our neighbor is, in seeing the least of these, and inviting them to his inclusive banquet table. We are all in this together.

Lois Saylor is an editorial advisor for Shalom! and attends the Harrisburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church.

Woman Reaching

a poem by L. A. Saylor

*a woman reaching out
touching the hem of his garment
these fringes of faith
like Miriam packing her tambourine
and dancing shoes
for a desert trip
or Mary packing her heart
with untied thoughts
like Sarah touching old age with a promise
or Elizabeth
unpacking an old hope
and a woman at a well, thirsty
a foreign woman, accepting crumbs
or Rahab with only a scarlet hope
and Ruth grasping the hem of Naomi
taking faith for a walk
without a path*

Editor's Notes

2024 subscription renewals: The 2024 subscription renewal letters will be going out soon (or maybe already has). The cost is still \$20 per year, with additional contributions welcome. You can renew and contribute online at bicus.org/resources/publications/shalom/ or send a check payable to Brethren in Christ U.S, to the editor. Thank you!

Upcoming topics:

In anticipation of the 2024 General Assembly, the Spring edition will address the theme, "Formed to Follow." What does it mean to follow Jesus faithfully and with integrity? If you have ideas for topics or would like to write for *Shalom!*, contact the editor at bickhouse@aol.com.

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431 Grantham Rd., Mechanicsburg, PA 17055

BOOK REVIEW: The Least of These

By Lois Saylor

UNDERSTANDING JESUS'S CALL to be mindful of and helpful to people in need is basic to any reading of scripture. James echoes this call in his letter to the church so profoundly that some think he is putting works over faith. James, however, is calling for our faith to be active, to follow the words of Jesus towards "the least of these." And Jesus's teachings follow the instruction and expectations of the law and prophets of our Jewish heritage. We see this in a collection of essays in the book, *The Least of These: Practicing a Faith Without Margins*. Editor Angie Ward organizes a thoughtful progression of chapters leading the reader into multiple reasons and ways to practice our faith without margins, without barriers, or restrictions.

Ten authors from different backgrounds write on various topics leading to a wide-ranging conversation while the cohesion of the theme remains intact and in the forefront of each chapter. Some chapters rely on stories that are moving and motivating. Other chapters take the reader through theology, history, and biblical foundations for social justice. Still others explore the virtue of proximity, multi-ability churches, and practical applications of scripture. I found some of the theology and historical chapters to be basic and well suited for those who have not yet

studied the topic. A study guide at the end of the book has questions to help stimulate discussion, making it helpful for youth groups or those beginning to explore this aspect of scriptural calling.

For those already acquainted with a "least of these" theology and lifestyle, the book offers some thought-provoking questions and suggestions. The first author talks about a man who needed help. One lesson she learned from him (among many others), concerned the barriers to helping, which included "our selfishness and entitlement . . . a frenetic pace of busyness." Another author saw that financial help was based on the recipient meeting "certain criteria" making them somehow "worthy of assistance." Readers can ask if they have these same barriers and further ask what hinders them from helping.

So how do we approach helping? One author challenges us to understand the "least of these" does not mean "less than." He admits he was guilty of this himself when a man showed up at church. He writes, "[I viewed] myself as the service provider and him as the service recipient." Instead, it turned out to be a valuable and mutual relationship lasting years. He writes:

Real compassion, however, is when we

enter into mutually beneficial opportunities with our neighbors through personal proximity, personal interactions, and personal relationships. . . . Whenever we find ourselves in one-way relationships in which there is not mutual benefit, then we likely aren't practicing compassion but rather a form of patronization that is meant to make us feel good about ourselves. This is not the Kingdom at all.

Another chapter focused on the community aspect of our calling to be involved neighbors. We are called to be a church body working together. If the role of reaching out is daunting or overwhelming as individuals, we don't have to do this alone. We can and should reach out together. "This is community," she writes. "This is a family thing."

She sees this happening in multiple ways. A congregation together can meet the individual needs of a refugee family, a single mom, an unhoused person, or a victim of sex trafficking. On a community level, a church could support a struggling neighborhood business or a local sport ministry for those unable to afford athletic association fees, and under-resourced schools always need help with supplies that we can provide. On a larger cultural level, churches can support a

continued on page 11