

## Building Bridges Between Church and State

# PEOPLE MOVING FORWARD

**T**hose of us who live in today's culture of materialism and consumerism have become divided into two separate and distinct economic cultures. There is a culture that surrounds those with comfortable lifestyles and adequate income. There is another culture that exists for those who struggle to pay for food, housing, medical care, and clothing. They are very different worlds with very different realities—different languages, different values, different fears, different goals, different assumptions.

The United Methodist Church is predominantly populated by those who are comfortable and who generally do not want to enter into the other world. Although we are often moved to give gifts to those who have needs and who happen to come to our attention, we are often either unwilling or unconsciously resistant to being in relationship with those who are economically poor. By staying separate, we are not only failing Jesus' repeated teachings to "love one another as I have loved you," but we are also depriving ourselves of the abilities, and the joys of knowing, a significant part of God's family.

### **NEW OPPORTUNITY**

I read about the 1996 Charitable Choice Welfare Reform Act two years

### **Sue Owen**

after it had passed. I was both intrigued and excited by the possibilities it offered for bringing these two cultures together. I took this idea to the Oregon-Idaho Annual Conference's committee for the Bishops' Initiative on Children and Poverty and we decided

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to ask the State of Oregon's Department of Human Services what was being done and how we could be involved.

The reception from the State's Adult and Family Services was initially both curious and cautious. They had not at that time engaged in any particular program or endeavor with a church. Nevertheless they indicated an interest and we returned to them with a proposal.

After eight months of negotiation, which included the State's District Attorney and our Conference's Chancellor to insure clear legal boundaries, a program emerged that would develop relationships between families receiving state assistance, church members, and state employed case managers. With the hope that life would be better for all of us who were involved, we named the program People Moving Forward.

The state's willingness to employ a retired supervisor from their department to oversee the start up of the program was a key factor in its success. Arlene Arlin-Janssens was instrumental in laying the foundations for the bridge between the world of church and state. She not only was known and respected by the Department of Human Services, but she was also a committed Christian who believed in the project.

All of us involved in the project had a passionate conviction that our faith mandated us to "be with" those who have the least and who are the most rejected in society. John Wesley understood the same theological premise and our United Methodist roots are embedded in his zealous love for the poor. We were certain that we who have become insulated from the poor would be the ones most blessed by these relationships. It has proven to be so.

# Grace Note

One of the joys of my life in recent months has come as a result of the Bishops' Initiative on Children and Poverty. I decided to get directly involved with some "children who are at risk." I am now tutoring/mentoring two second grade boys on Tuesday after school and two third grade boys on Wednesday afternoons after school. I go to the inner city schools and help the boys with their homework and whatever else the teacher assigns. One of the interesting experiences has been to help them with their Young Authors project.

I am finding that I have been living in a world different from that of these boys. It is an exciting opportunity to enter their world. It seems that one of the biggest needs of these boys is a meaningful relationship with an adult male. I'm fascinated by the dynamics and grateful to the Initiative for encouraging me to get involved in this manner.

*Bishop R. Sheldon Duecker*  
Fort Wayne, Indiana

and manipulation can never create pathways to God. Honest caring and compassionate listening on the other hand are sacred means that lead to the Divine.

The program began October 2000 with five brave teams from five different congregations. The individual team members were required to have 8 hours of mandatory training led by the Adult and Family Services staff, to submit to background checks, to sign a confidentiality agreement, and to be committed to the relationship for at least one year. There was also a required training and an all-day meeting convened for all 5 teams, pastors, and case managers once every 3 months.

## **BARRIERS BECOME BLESSINGS**

To say that this has been an easy project would be a lie. The challenges have been much bigger than I anticipated. One of the biggest issues has been the establishment of trust and dialogue between church people and state employees. As we persevered and prayed our way through the walls of suspicion and false assumptions, this has also been one of the biggest blessings.

The other "mountain" that faith had to move was to overcome the cultural difference between the church people and the families. There have been many incidents where we recognized that perspectives determine actions and we sought to understand the reasons for the perspectives that we and others hold. These efforts have led us to abundant Grace. . . . a Grace that gives us peace that passes all understanding.

We have made great strides. We now have a paid director, Renee Cornwall, through the General Board of Global Ministry's Mission Personnel opportunity. We are in the process of establishing an Advisory Council that will include representatives of United Methodist congregations, case managers and trainers from Adult and Family Services, and family members who have previously participated in the program. Both partners, church and state, hope that the program can be expanded. We have a strong sense that the revitalization of our churches lies in the faithful attentiveness to those in our midst who have the least, and we have experi-

## **How It Works**

The program works in the following way. A team of church members numbering 4-6 people are introduced to a family who receive financial aid from the State of Oregon. The families have volunteered to participate in the program and are selected by case managers on the basis of both need and motivation. There is an initial process of goal setting and formation of shared expectations. Generally the team and the family understand that they are to work cooperatively to help the family move forward in life through joint problem solving. The team does not "fix" the family's problems. They do not give the family money. Rather they act as consultants, advisors, assis-

tants. For example, a team might arrange child care, take the family to a doctor, offer to tutor a child, help create a budget, assist in completing job applications, talk about nutrition, and assist in shopping. The possibilities are endless and include social gatherings

such as picnics, bowling, and eating in restaurants.

Crucial to both the church and the state is the agreement that assistance would not be linked to the family's attendance at church

or their required compliance to any specific Christian doctrine. Just as important is the understanding that members of the church team can state their beliefs and claim their faith as a way of being authentic in the relationship. We are convinced that coercion

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enced Christ as Emmanuel embodied in this work.

Our faith has been enriched by the lives of the people we have come to know. A single mother with three children came into a meeting with her team saying, "I can't tell you how nice it is to have someone to talk to about my worries." After several months of working together, she has her first job. It came after the team secured suitable clothes for interviewing and encouraged her when some interviews did not secure employment.

Another single mother with two children commented to her team that she didn't know people could be so nice to children. Her kids soon became involved in the church's children's group.

A father who was working full time on a minimum wage job struggled with a sense of failure because he couldn't make the dollars stretch to meet his family's needs. The team helped him establish a more operable budget and his sense of self-esteem grew noticeably. He said, "Pay checks used to mean a day of fret and conflict. Now they offer me a way to a better life."

With the current opportunities available with Charitable Choice, it is a wonderful time for local congregations and annual conferences to consider how they might become partners with the state in assisting those living marginally. Our program does not involve any receipt of funds from the state and I believe that arrangement has its advantages. But whether your program is funded or not, it is time to reclaim our Wesleyan and scriptural call to be with the lost and the least. If you have questions or if we can be of any help, please write Rev. Sue Owen, First United Methodist Church, PO Box 854, Bend, OR 97709 or Renee Cornwell, 1845 High St. SE, Salem, OR 97302. □



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