ASSOCIATION OF VINEYARD CHURCHES

Cutting Edge

Vol. 5 No. 3
Fall 2001

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Cutting Edge is the church planting newsletter of the Vineyard and is published quarterly by the U.S. Association of Vineyard Churches.

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THE JOURNEY INWARD OUTWARD, AND FORWARD

THE RADICAL VISION OF THE CHURCH OF THE SAVIOUR

by, Jeff Bailey

"If men and women today began by the thousands experiencing the depths of Jesus Christ in a transforming way, there would simply be no place for their expression of experience to fit into the present-day straitjackets of Christianity. Protestant or Catholic, neither one is structured to contain a mass of devoted people who long for spiritual depth. We are structured towards infancy."

– Gordon Cosby, The Church of the Saviour

Over 50 years ago a young chaplain with the 101st Airborne returned from World War II with a vision for a church that would be radically different from the other churches of the day. It would be ecumenical, focused on Jesus, and profoundly high in commitment. It would take the depth of a person's inward life and the call to sacrificial activism with equal seriousness. It would make spiritual disciplines and solidarity with the poor normative. It would help people discover their gifts and calling. It would be socially aware and politically active. It would start its own in-house seminary, modeled after the underground seminary started by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It would require its members to be deeply trained in both theology and Christian formation—as if the very life of the world depended on it. It would call people to leave behind their privatized individualism and move with increasing depth into loving, authentic community. And it would be located in the heart of Washington, DC.

The church that was birthed out of that vision is now over 50 years old. Fifty years to experiment, mature, deepen. A measurement of its fruits can now be taken. How have they done?

This is the story of what one small, radically committed church can do.

"large numbers... tend almost inevitably toward depersonalization and institutionalism,

>> The Church of the Saviour in Washington, DC, has long been considered one of the most important and innovative experiments in church life in the 20th century. It was started in 1947 by Gordon Cosby and his wife, Mary, and first came to national prominence when *Reader's Digest* carried an article about the church in 1953. Many more people became familiar with the church through the writings of Elizabeth O'Connor, a staff member of Church of the Saviour, through her books such as *Call to Commitment* and *Journey Inward, Journey Outward*. Thousands from around the world began flocking to visit the church in those days, and have ever since.

A new generation – hungry for church models which combine not only deep spirituality but a Jesus-focused social activism – are less familiar with The Church of the Saviour then previous generations. But the church is as active as ever, and many of the original faces are still there. Gordon Cosby, who started the church when he was 30 years old, is now 84. He still preaches every Sunday. His energy and vision continues unabated. A preoccupation with Jesus, the poor, and God's vision for the world pervade most of his conversations. His prayers, his congregation will tell you, evoke a tangible awareness of the Holy Spirit's presence.

In person, however, his manner is very gentle. He slouches in his chair while talking to you, leaning to one side. He has a distinctive Virginian accent that people often comment on after hearing him. These days, much of his time is spent in meeting after meeting, giving counsel to the scores of ministries the church has spawned. He continues to read voraciously. He still practices contemplative prayer twice a day, in both the morning in the evening, and participates in the daily noon prayers at the ministry center. He has a quiet way of making visitors feel very welcome.

His wife, Mary, as vivacious and gracious as ever, continues to meet with various groups for lunch every Wednesday—as she has for over 40 years—to talk about what it means to be a transforming church in today's world. She still teaches in their Servant Leadership School, and her classes fill immediately.

The Church of the Saviour, of course, is much bigger than them. Try to explain the church to someone, however, and one quickly finds that it resists easy categorization.

THE OUTWARD JOURNEY

It is socially active. Over 75 independent ministries have emerged from the church, some of them scattered around the city, many of them centered in the inner-city DC neighborhood of Adams Morgan. Collectively they raise over $10 million annually. Nearly all of them were started by members of the church who had no idea what they were doing when they began. Members are fond of quoting something Gordon said years ago: "The most helpful experiments are accomplished by people who are too naïve to know what they are getting into. The wise and experienced know too much ever to accomplish the impossible."

So, for example, when a handful of church members looked around their urban neighborhood to see what its biggest needs were, they decided housing for the poor was at the top of the list. Not one of them knew anything about low-income housing. But they raised money anyway, bought a dilapidated old apartment building, renovated it themselves, and then managed those apartments for low-income people at a fraction of the going rate. Today that has developed into Jubilee Housing, with hundreds of apartment units providing housing for over 800 people. Other ministries started in the same way: Good Shepherd, an after-school mentoring and tutoring program for 100 inner-city youth; Jubilee Jobs, which trained and placed over 1,000 unemployed people into new jobs last year; Christ House, a 34-bed, fully staffed medical hospital for homeless people, in addition to a walk-in clinic for the poor, and separate residential homes for men, women, and children with AIDS; Sarah's Circle, a large residential facility for the elderly poor; Samaritan Inns, a major ministry which annually helps over 500 people recover from drug and alcohol addiction, and—given its success rate—is considered a national model for addiction rehab; and Harvest, a ministry focused on discipling the very wealthy, taking them on ministry trips to such places as Bosnia, Haiti, and India.

THE INWARD JOURNEY

For all its social activism, however, the Church of the Saviour is a community of contemplatives. One regularly hears talk of "being" before "doing." Within several years of the church's founding, its handful of members had bought land in the rolling Maryland countryside for a retreat center, which soon became Dayspring, an extensive retreat complex. Members of the community regularly take silent retreats there. Meetings often open up with several minutes of silence and centering prayer. Members of the Church of the Saviour commit to an hour of prayer daily, and have been deeply mentored in the contemplative tradition of the mystics. Henri Nouwen spent time with the Church of the Saviour, and finished his book *Life of the Beloved* while residing there, with Gordon's encouragement. Members—which include moms, doctors, teachers, and students—often meet regularly with a spiritual director, and fill out weekly reports on their spiritual life.

A LEARNING COMMUNITY

The community is theologically astute. Visit the Potter's House Café and Bookstore –one of the first coffeehouses in the country back in 1964, a place "where non-religious people can ask religious questions," as they put it back then – and you will find little evidence of "pop" Christian books. Instead, the shelves are full of books on current theology, spiritual formation, social activism, and political justice. In the early days the church cut its teeth on the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Elton Trueblood, and Karl Barth. Classes offered at their Servant Leadership School today give some evidence. Over the past few months, classes included "Servant Leadership and Organizational Development," "An Introduction to the Causes of Inner-City Poverty," an expository class on Philippians, a practicum on intercessory and centering prayer, a course on the Desert Fathers, and a symposium on "The World Bank, the IMF, and the Poor." Past teachers have included Walter Wink, Henri Nouwen, and Parker Palmer.

toward a lessening of commitment. So we resist the temptation to power that comes through numbers."

AT THE CORE OF IT ALL

The community is relentlessly centered on Jesus. It simply takes seriously the call to follow Jesus in the most literal of ways. Gordon said in one recent sermon: "If one longs for depth in life we must focus on a very few things. There is so little time in one's brief lifetime. And what is that one thing? We are saying it is Jesus. I choose to go deep-sea diving in that ocean. Jesus said, 'I am the way, truth, and the life.' Is that true or false? By faith I say it is true so I give my entire life to that deep exploration. I want to know him in depth and to be transformed into his likeness. It is that likeness that I want to have when I embark on a journey to the Land beyond death. There are infinite depths in Christ to explore." Later, Gordon says, "Our task is to be so deeply and intimately connected with Christ that the world will experience the resurrected Christ—the newness God intends—whenever it touches our corporate life."

COMMITTED TO SMALLNESS

Despite the church's considerable impact on the city and beyond, however, it has always remained small. And that is by intention. Nine other faith communities have been planted directly out of Church of the Saviour (while scores of other churches around the country refer to themselves as "in the tradition of Church of the Saviour.") Many who have heard about the church or seen the breadth of its impact are surprised that even at its largest Church of the Saviour never had more than 150 members (though hundreds more attended or were deeply involved). That is due, in large part, to the high commitment required for membership. From the earliest days of the church, after Gordon Cosby returned from World War II, a core assumption has been that the greatest impact on the world comes about by small, highly committed and disciplined communities of people focused on outward mission, inward transformation, and loving, accountable community. Church history, church members point out, shows this to almost always have been true. Gordon is convinced that size actually *inhibits* effectiveness, that it works against a community of people being truly counter-cultural, to having depth, to breaking addictions to the culture. "Large numbers," he says, "tend almost inevitably toward depersonalization and institutionalism, toward a lessening of commitment. So we resist the temptation to power that comes through numbers."

To be a member in the church, not surprisingly, takes time. One must first complete core classes in their School of Christian Living, including such classes as Christian Ethics, Old Testament, Prayer, Being with the Poor, and Discerning Call. To begin pursuing membership formally, one must begin meeting with a Sponsor who functions as a spiritual director, helping one work with issues of outward calling and personal growth. At some point along the way the decision is made to join one of the many mission groups as an Intern Member. An Intern Member will begin to work with the outward action of that mission group (perhaps working with poor children in a local neighborhood, for example, or helping single moms), as well as be accountable to the group for the inward disciplines (which generally include—though each mission group is slightly different—an hour of prayer daily, planned study of Scripture, proportional giving beginning with the tithe, a silent retreat each year, and simplicity of lifestyle). They will also agree to pursue deep community with that mission group, opening up the whole of their lives. As one moves closer to becoming a formal member, a Spiritual Autobiography is written, which covers the trajectory of one's life with Christ, which is then read to members of the mission group. Finally, after a week's vigil of prayer, should one still believe God is calling them to membership, a formal commitment at the church worship service is made, surrounded by members of one's mission group. Membership vows are renewed each year.

THE FRUIT OF DISCIPLINE

While such a commitment seems daunting to many, it has, by all accounts, produced a rich abundance of fruit. Indeed, in the early years, Gordon often warned of the dangers of the abundance their disciplines were bringing about. Ten years after the founding of the church Gordon said this to his congregation: "My conviction is that our church is in greater danger now than we were in the beginning. You have heard of the monastic cycle which goes like this: discipline produces abundance; abundance destroys discipline. We are at the point of having a relative abundance of spiritual power, of spiritual dynamics, of pure joy because of what has been done for us. If we are not very careful, we will let the abundance destroy the discipline. An additional danger is that anyone seeking membership in the Church of the Saviour today is not 'put on the spot' as in the early years, when only a very few people understood us. In those days we were considered a weird organism. We were breaking certain long-established patterns. We required a period of preparation for membership. There was a forthright demand for full commitment of life. And people wondered, 'What is this?' Today there are many people who understand our church. We are no longer put on the spot in the same way. To become an 'admirer of Jesus' (Kierkegaard's term) is much easier than to become a follower. In fact, it is possible now for a person to come into the cultural pattern of our church without having met the Head of the church. This is disastrous beyond description. We must come to the place where we can do what Jesus did, where we can watch the rich young ruler walk away and, with sorrow and an ache in our hearts, let him go until he can come back on the terms of Jesus Christ. We have been so afraid we might lose potential members that we have been willing to take them on their own terms. Then we wonder why the church is relatively impotent and doesn't have the power to transform human life, to shake society to its very roots."

When describing the membership requirements for the church, Gordon explains, "We have certain minimum, entrance disciplines for our church. Of course, several things need to be remembered concerning any discipline. There is always the danger of legalism. But this is a danger whether we formally adopt a discipline or not. People will always latch onto rules, and thereby seek to justify themselves. The opposite danger is cheap grace, and I believe that to be a greater danger. For every legalist in our churches I think we have ten who have entered into cheap grace, who have sued their liberty as license. Failure to keep an elementary discipline such as I have described would indicate a failure to respond in any full sense to God's grace in Jesus Christ."

"Having said that," he continues, "we also need to ask, what lies beyond our entrance disciplines?

GOD'S DREAM FOR THE WORLD

"God's dream for radical newness will require discipline. Not discipline connected to punishment or shame, but discipline that roots us in Christ, deepening our connection to God and one another. This rootedness will come from having consistent, ordered ways in which we remain open to Grace, and they will be unique to each one of us. Grace constantly seeks entrance into our souls in order to effect change, but Grace will never force her way in. Discipline is the means by which we open ourselves to the sort of radical change that has always been God's intention for us. – Gordon Cosby

"you're never going to have community in depth if you don't work at it."

I think that one reason that we have trouble sometimes with the minimum disciplines is we have made them maximum disciplines. We have not , in specific terms, considered anything beyond them. But personality cannot remain static. I must take on new freedom which has come from its response in faithful obedience to Christ and his commands, and use that new freedom to let it flow in wider and deeper channels."

THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

This history of the development of the Church of the Saviour is instructive. Gordon's initial vision was for "reaching the world in 25 years" with a large church and thousands of people. His wife, Mary, often says, "Our visions were absurd, but they were awfully sweet." Mary's father was the pastor of the large Rivermont Avenue Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia, and later the 3,000 member First Baptist Church of Alexandria, Virginia. Upon Gordon's return from World War II, he and Mary went to visit John D. Rockefeller in New York City, who had participated in the building of the famous Riverside Church in New York, to look for funding for this new church. They were turned down, however. Over that summer he and Mary went to summer school at Union Seminary and sat at the feet of theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr and George Buttrick. During that time, as Gordon began to reflect on his experience in the war, the idea began to take root that what really changes the world are small groups of highly committed, disciplined people. Their vision was encouraged by the Quaker theologian Elton Trueblood, who became a close friend of Church of the Saviour. "Elton Trueblood," says Gordon, "was able to put into words what we were trying to be and do before we ourselves could articulate what was happening. Whenever Elton traveled and lectured he told our story and gave us exposure to the larger Christian world. I always found his faith in us awesome."

The church began as many church plants do. ("It was primarily by word of mouth that people came," says Gordon.) He and Mary moved to the Washington, DC area in 1946 and began meeting with a tiny core of people for 18 months, praying and thinking about a new church. In 1947 they began meeting for worship and a formation program called the School of Christian Living. It was hospitality and warmth that helped them draw those initial people. Says Mary, a gracious Southerner, of those early days, "I wrote in my journal once that I had decided that Southern breeding and the Holy Spirit look alike at first. Then as time goes on, it's very clear one has eternal dimensions that the other doesn't. But when you are an evangelist and you want people to come into your church, the breeding will hold them until the Holy Spirit takes hold."

The idea of intense training, of spiritual formation, came very early in the game for them. In the earliest days, says Gordon, "we formed what we called cell groups or growth groups." (This was well before the "small group movement" was even heard of.) "The cell groups were picked up from the Wesley movement. We felt that if we could nurture people in small groups they would then be able to move into mission. We found that never happened. Not that it seldom happened—it *never* happened. Temperamentally, most people are either given to the inward journey but don't want to be bothered with the outward work and getting their hands dirty with the poor; or they want to get out there with the poor and they don't have time for the inward life – they're just going to get the world fixed. We said both."

DEFINING GROUP LIFE

This realization led the Church of the Saviour to work with the idea of mission groups. "Anybody can have a prayer group, a group to study scriptures, therapy groups, anything they want to," says Gordon. "We've had hundreds of them through the years. That's all right. We welcome it. But the membership structure is based on a person being called to the inward life and the outward journey in the same group. These are not groups just to strengthen each person in his or her individual mission, but in a corporate mission.

"I would say that's the most crucial structure we discovered, but it took us two or three years to find out that the cell groups did not know how to make the transition to mission. We prayed until we got tired of praying, until I'm sure God got tired of hearing us. Finally, we just cancelled all of our groups as of a certain date. We started again around this new understanding.

"So since the early 1950s, we've focused on this business of call, which is to say, 'This is God's call. I've got to do this.' We're totally committed to the inner life, the life of prayer and worship, of deepening our capacity to love, working with the blockages of love, journaling, and retreats. All of that goes under the heading of the inward life. And with that comes a real, worthy, challenging mission in the world.

"You've got to have some structure for continual deepening. You have to be accountable somewhere."

Gordon often talks about how organizations need to continually return to their "founding myth," the "essence" of a community so deep it can only be expressed in a story. For Christians, this founding story is the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. When asked what it means for him, for the Church of the Saviour, to work out of their founding story *today*, Gordon answers, "By acting as if we're just learning it, just beginning to implement it again. By not just assuming that we *are* working out of it. Often, when the going gets rough, we find we've not internalized it. We are not living out of the Lordship of Christ. We have not been crucified with Christ. We are following our addictions to the culture."

BREAKING OUR ADDICTION TO THE CULTURE

This breaking free of our "addiction to the culture" is something the Church of The Savior gives great attention to. Says Gordon: "Most of us are living, to some degree, as addicted persons, striving anxiously after power and money and prestige and relevance, trapped in the turbulence of wanting more. These addictions are so subtle for most of us that we have the illusion of being free people when in actuality we are immersed in society's expectations. We have given ourselves to God, but who decides what we do with our lives? Usually, we do. We are subtle control freaks, truly believing we are turning our lives over to God but demanding a minimum of comforts, whether it be good health or a secure home or caring friends. We are addicted to having more and more comfort, which society says we deserve.

"We are addicted to things that money and power can buy. We spend more on entertainment and pet care and toiletries than on the needs of children barely existing in poverty; we strive after positions that seem important in our jobs and our churches, whether or not God is calling us to them; we long to be noticed and honored,

WORKING FOR JUSTICE

>> There's no way to hang onto the Christian faith without taking seriously God's longing for equality for the total human family. Lots of people have heard of God being just, but they don't even think about attempting to literally embody that justice. "What does that mean? How much privilege do I have a right to hang onto? How much privilege do I have a right to pass on to my children? Do I have a right to spend all my resources seeing that my children get a university education when other children don't get any education at all?" That's privilege. People say, "Well, if I can educate my children, they are then going to use their education to work for compassion and justice." But that doesn't normally happen. That education is usually used for self-advancement and perpetuating the separation."

– Gordon Cosby

superficially if necessary. We forget that Jesus, 'though he was in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself.' Our culture promotes a constant filling up, but our disciplines will draw us toward greater emptiness, so that we can be better prepared for obedience and, ultimately, for finding our place in God's plan—finding true relevance."

THE CHURCH AS COMMUNITY

Tying all of these things together at Church of the Saviour is the centrality of community. In fact, there is a constant drumbeat over the dangers of individualism. Being deeply connected to a living organism of people is considered intrinsic to being a true follower of Jesus. This is assumed to primarily take place in one's mission group, a concrete group of people with whom one is being the outward life of Jesus to the world, and with whom one is deepening one's inward life with Jesus through loving accountability, confession, and encouragement. Gordon said this in a recent sermon: "The central reality of church is a group of people called to an ever-deepening personal belonging of friendship with Jesus of Nazareth. The command is to abide, to dwell in him as he dwelt in the Father. You have an image that Jesus used of total intimacy. But Jesus doesn't give us a deeper relationship with him apart from his Body. Jesus does not come alone. He can't because Jesus already has a people, he has a family. And when Jesus comes to us he always bring his family with him. Then we say, 'No, I want just you. What I've heard about you is fairly good but what I've heard about your family is not so good.' And Jesus says, 'We come together.'

"So our first work, our primary call, is just to be a people. Lay people on fire with passion—a passion for Jesus, a passion for one another, a passion for ourselves. What we are talking about is a people among whom a supernatural life is flowing. We are talking about people who literally love each other as each has been loved by God as seen in Jesus. We're not just talking about a general command, 'Love one another'—we're talking about a particular, concrete group of people where that is actually happening.

"At this point I can hear my friends objecting and I hear a part of me objecting. This all sounds like holy prattle. That kind of people would be great but we know they don't exist. We know ourselves and we know one another. Which means each of us must make a choice. We must decide whether or not God can produce the people he claims to be able to produce in the new creation. Many people have surface longings and hunger to be a part of the people of God, and many wish they could find such a people. However, a deeper lack is the willingness to belong, a readiness to be bonded to them. To trust them even though under pressure they will betray me. The question comes whether I will let my weight down with them, whether I will cast my destiny with them. I will not try to exist alone though it will cause great pain at times. I will inwardly become part of the people. I will reveal ever deeper levels of myself. I will work on the deeper revelations that they may be ready to share with me, and accepting the responsibility that requires."

BEING WITH THE POOR

Finally, there is an ongoing emphasis in the church of being with the poor, and of working to not only meet their immediate needs, but to change the institutional structures which perpetuate and support systemic injustice.

>>> continued on pg20

COMMUNITY

>> You're never going to have a community in depth if you don't work at it. No community that I know in the nation has the depth of community it needs to have. We were committed very early in our church's life to the principle of smallness and this of course means division. Evangelism is a must and we must get the news out to all the nations; that is the Great Commission. So if we get the news to the nations and there are new people excited to join us then we must find ways of dividing and not getting too large. It is painful but it must be done."
–Gordon Cosby

BOOKS AND WEBSITES

Call to Commitment
by Elizabeth O'Connor

This is the first of Elizabeth's books telling the story of Church of the Saviour from its earliest days. It also talks in detail about the principles undergirding the church. It has recently been reissued and is a still among the most well-known.

By Grace Transformed
by Gordon Cosby

By Grace Transformed is a collection of sermons by Gordon Cosby over the past 50 years. It includes everything from his address to the World Council of Churches to sermons on new structures for church life.

Cry Pain, Cry Hope
by Elizabeth O'Connor

Cry Pain, Cry Hope is one of Elizabeth's last books, all around the subject of the process of discovering one's call.

Handbook for Churches and Mission Groups,
by Dorothy Devers and Gordon Cosby

Handbook for Churches and Mission Groups, by Dorothy Devers and Gordon Cosby, is a small booklet outlining in detail the starting of mission groups and new faith communities according to the model of Church of the Saviour.

All of the above books are available from the Potter's House Bookstore: The website is www.pottershousebooks.org and their phone number is (202) 232-5483. Also available from the Potter's House are audio tapes of sermons from Gordon Cosby over the past several decades.

Websites

To learn more about the church of the Saviour and to find current resources, visit the website of the Servant Leadership School at **www.slschool.org**

a conversation with Gordon Cosby

Recently Gordon and I sat down to discuss some specific questions about the approach of The Church of the Saviour. Having gotten some lunch at the Potter's House, we settled into a side room at the Festival Center, sipped coffee and, with the sounds of Washington, DC traffic rushing by, talked about God's vision for the church.

—Jeff Bailey

The Church of the Saviour has been a significant witness to the gospel over the years. How important has its social activism been to that witness?

I think a verbal witness is not helpful or effective unless we are embodying it in a corporate way. Unless we are corporately pouring out our lives in compassion and service, then we are simply not being faithful no matter how many trappings of church there are.

For the most part the American church has outreach groups and evangelism committees, but not a significant proportion of people in the church are actually involved with acts of compassion and creating structures for justice. Our hope would be that in a genuine church everyone would be thus engaged, not just a few doing it on behalf of the whole.

So we need to preach about this stuff. We need to preach it to the limit of our vision. Personally, I've got to embody this as deeply as I know how. I've got to talk about it at the deepest level I can, even knowing that there's a tremendous gap between what I'm seeing and what I'm actually doing.

So we cast vision for this kind of witness, even though there's a gap between our preaching and our practice?

Right—but knowing that we've got to close the gap. That we *can* embody what we see. *We ought to become like Christ*. He is in process of forming us into the likeness of his being, and we cannot use the existing "gap" as an excuse for not deeply *becoming*. I'm still doing at age 84 what I tried to do back in the 1940s. I'm now living with a little church that came out of the Church of the Saviour. The Friends of Jesus church. We are four years old now, and I'm working with that rather than doing something which would be more splashy.

Why not do something more splashy?

Because I need to always be *doing* it. Some years ago we were guided to the place where we let go of the Church of the Savior in its earlier form, simply because we were getting too big and we were not being faithful to the depths. We were too much appreciated. Lots of people wanted us to tell them how to do it, and we were losing actually *doing* it. So, the way for me to be most faithful to what I continue to believe in is to be faithful in imparting it *now*, rather than just talking about the experiences we've had. The best contribution that I can make is to keep doing this in a quiet little way with a small group of people. They help me, and I help them, to go deeper.

What is your understanding of a true church, and what would it have to struggle with to be that?

The encounter with the person of Jesus is basic and central—the narrow gate through which we go to become a corporate people with him. In that encounter with Jesus, if it's genuine, my inner being begins to die into the very being of God, and God's very being begins to flow into me. Something begins to happen which is absolutely central in that encounter, if I surrender to the Lordship of Jesus. I think we tend to get away from that, as we move on and get more sophisticated and more educated. Getting to know Jesus at a deeper level and letting him know us at a deeper level tends to get less central as people move on. Try to get some students who come back after graduating from seminary to get back to the centrality of Jesus! It's extremely difficult.

As I pursue Jesus, I run across a few people who are trying to do the same thing, and we are drawn together. As we are drawn together around that continuing call, that "Follow me" of Jesus, that is to me the essence of Church. That's what led us to have a preparatory structure called our School of Christian Living for all these years. It's really a local church's seminary, a way to introduce people to our understanding of who Jesus is, and what the Way is all about, and the nature of church, of sin, of salvation. Every person who comes into church is to be prepared for ministry in a world which is broken and wounded and extremely dangerous. Dietrich Bonhoeffer set up his seminary to train his people who were going to die in concentration camps. We train people to come into a community which will sustain us through life's journey.

Every church has got to have a structure to help people make a passage from the world's culture into another Reality. I don't think they can make that journey alone. There has to be a training period. The structure of a local segment of the Body of Christ needs to have its "seminary," and it's got to be serious. Our whole future depends on it. The church, then, is that little group of people in Christ who want to be faithful on the Way. That Way is one of compassion and justice, and translating justice into the structures of society.

And, of course, in all of this we are preparing people for the Life which follows this life.

Although that Life which you are talking about isn't an other-worldly heaven, the way some people would think of it?

No, no. This life is preparation for a birth into another level of Reality. And I've got a responsibility to do what I can to help it be a good birth. We are here to get to know the Living Reality that brought everything into being, that is sustaining it now, and into whose Reality we are going.

We are here to get to know God. The best way to know God is through his Son who was sent to us to help us know that nature. That is my job, the Church's job. That's quite different from what the church normally prepares people for—dealing with the vicissitudes of this life, and how to be a little more successful.

So here we are. What is life for? Life is to get to know Jesus Christ, really know Jesus Christ, and be formed into the image of Jesus Christ. To be formed into servants, servant leaders—not successful leaders. Therefore, I'm caught in a deepening mode to get to know the servant Jesus and become like him. The Church is that body of people who are on that same journey, who are trying to corporately embody the being of Jesus in a broken world and with our broken, sinful selves.

How does that process work here, bringing people to that point?

They might come to one of the classes in the School of Christian Living, in order to find out what an encounter with Jesus means, or because they think they've met Jesus and want to get a little clearer about who he is. There are so many conceptions about Jesus, you know, that *my* Jesus might be *your* Jesus' worst enemy!

So, for the people who haven't had that encounter

and long for it, or are just generally interested – "What do you characters *do*?"– we say, "Come on, take a class, find out what this stuff is all about." It can also help those who have encountered Jesus understand how radical that encounter is. What people *think* is the encounter is often only what the culture tells them it is. But they have not really heard, "Follow me, leave your nets, leave the security as you know it. Follow me to the cross." So we interpret for people who have had a distorted concept.

This generally takes a two year period – getting on the same page, using the same terminology. Then, when the person says, "OK, I understand what you are talking about and I want to be a part of this thing," we say, "OK, we want to work with you as to what your "call" is. We get down to the concreteness of it. We commit to help you explore possibilities, and when you see it and are ready to launch out on that call, and you find a second person who can be with you in that call among the membership, which will make it corporate, we will help you create structures for that call. You can either stay within this Body of Christ if that's right, and we will include your call, or you can start a new little faith community or anything you want. But we stick to that concept of 'call' because we feel that each of us have one, and that if we are here long enough together and pray together, we will find it. Then all of us are being faithful at the point of our calls; we are not just joining some amorphous group because it has a few charismatic leaders.

All of us are leaders around our call and our gifts. So the concept of 'call' and the concept of 'gifts' are absolutely essential. In our mission groups, we would work with each of us until we have a gift that we bring to that group, and all of us are bringing our gifts to make stronger and deeper that group, which is then flowing out in compassion to the world.

Did these assumptions emerge right from the very beginning of your life together? Or did they become more clear as you went along?

We weren't clear on *anything* at the beginning! Except that we wanted authenticity. We talked in those early days about "integrity of membership." We wanted to be real. We wanted to be faithful to the real Christ, and we wanted to embody as best we could the meaning of the New Testament church. So that hunger was there. But we had to learn step-by-step many of these things that we have been talking about. Each one of the steps was very painful, and we lost people at each of those steps as it became clearer.

You talk a lot about the need to "detox from the culture." What do you mean by that?

It's a way of describing sin. Sin has very little meaning to the average modern mind, so I use the expression, "Detoxification from the culture" to describe what we really mean by sin—sin being the inability to transcend ourselves and to live for others. What the Bible really means by sin is that we are addicted to the values of the world, the systems of the world. Jesus said that if we stay with the world's systems, the way the world views life, it leads to death. The realm of God which Jesus embodies and which he describes in the Beatitudes is the way that he says leads to life. We are so addicted to the culture that we don't even know it. We don't even know that we need detoxification. We don't know that we need an intensive recovery program!

So if you were to counsel someone who came to you and said, "I want to de-tox; I want to enter into whatever it takes to begin to change," what would you say?

First I would try to recover myself to keep from fainting! Almost never does that happen. But we have developed structures through the years. We have praxis classes on prayer, on Christian ethics, on servant leadership. Or, for example, we take wealthy people to Bosnia, to Haiti, and to India (with Mother Teresa before she died). We get them into situations where they can begin to see how unjust, how un-Christlike our world is.

We use the School of Christian Living to introduce people to the poor. In one of our early Ethics classes, I had a little group that met in the Potter's House, and one night I said, "Now what we are going to do is to close this formal part of the meeting. I want you to go out into the neighborhood and talk to people, get to know them. Then come back, and we'll talk about that." One of our folks, Don McClanen, who founded Athletes in Action and who has worked with people of wealth as much as anybody we've had, was introduced to life in the neighborhood that night. He went down and found a little church where there was a black woman who was a bishop and got to know her. He started spending one night a week in the neighborhood for a year. Then he started working with groups of disenfranchised African-American youths. That's what we do; we use whatever structures we can to get people into those things which are unfamiliar.

Sometimes in my class I'd say, "I want you to visit with one homeless person on the street this week., and write up an account of being with that person." Some people have had their lives change just by hanging around with homeless persons instead of just passing them by. It's a matter of getting to see life in a different way.

There's a lot of talk around Church of the Saviour about the inward and the outward journey. Can you talk more about the inward journey in particular?

Our feeling is that each of us has developed a false self through the years. We have not become what we were intended to become. We are not the embodiment of love which Jesus intended we should become. We have developed false patterns of happiness which develop out of this false self. We seek happiness in ways which do not deliver it. We are idol-worshippers.

The inward life is going down like Jesus told us to do, and—rather than covering things up—letting the false self die, and let the true self emerge. The inner work is the work of letting the false self go and becoming what we are fully intended to be. We feel it can only emerge in Jesus because he's the one who created our true selves.

We've repressed earlier experiences, we've been hurt and covered those hurts, we've been violated, we've stopped our growing at certain points. When the true self begins to emerge, especially in the context of the small group, we begin to see things emerging that we couldn't see before, as to what the outer work should be. We depend on Christ to help us with that outer work because we know we cannot do it ourselves. But all of us are seeing life differently because of the inner change. God has opened our eyes and let us see. Being able to see clearly doesn't come without the inner work.

For the average Christian with set notions of what evangelism is, how would you describe how *you* understand evangelism?

Evangelism is central. We have to remember, though, that we evangelize all the time. We may be true evangelists, or we may be false ones. *But whoever we are is affecting people all the time*. That's just the nature of people – we affect one another. The church is evangelizing all the time; it's always communicating something. Sometimes it's doing a faithful job and Jesus would be delighted, and other times, he's cringing. So in this deepening that we are talking about, Jesus is being known or not known all the time. So every one of our missions of compassion is evangelism. That's sharing the Word, embodying it. Out of that evangelism comes—many, many times—verbal evangelism. The central job of the church is to evangelize. It's the heart of who we are. God forgive us for doing it so poorly, but it is what we are committed to. We try to deepen that by the inner work, so that when we talk, people don't say, "If Jesus is like you and like this crowd here, I don't want him right now. I'm going to wait and see if I can find a better savior somewhere." We are hoping to share the treasure, the very heart of our life.

Our verbal evangelism and our structures for evangelism must come out of the *inner* work. If we are still living in the world's culture and haven't begun to break from our addiction to power and money and influence and "upward mobility," and we are talking to people about Jesus out of that place, well, that's the Jesus that they hear.

As things exist now, after 50-some years, how hopeful do you feel about the Church?

That's a difficult question, because from what I see of the institutional, organized church, that which calls itself the Church, I'm not hopeful. As far as what God is committed to, what Jesus died for and rose for…nothing is going to stop it. It's going to come into true fullness of being in God's time and in God's way. He is going to accomplish his purposes. Hope, then, which is rooted in God and in God's being – I'm seeking to keep my hope rooted there. To root hope in observable progress is always ephemeral. The deeper we go into life, the more disappointed we may be, because we are seeing how slow it is to us. It's not happening. We are up against principalities and power at deep levels. I would try not to root hope in the seen; I would try to deepen it always in the unseen, in the nature of God and of Christ who is the pioneer of our faith. ■

THE JOURNEY INWARD OUTWARD, AND FORWARD

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"When we see the culture as it really is," Gordon says, "with its empty, illusory promises of success and power; when we plant ourselves into the group of people intent on listening to Jesus and following wherever he leads, we will find our hearts flowering, opening to the needs of the afflicted, the oppressed, the poor. Those whom we quietly despised for their lack of hygiene, their lack of education, their lack of willpower, their lack of being more like us, we will begin to love—really love—in the way that Christ loves each of us despite our despicable and continual human failures.

"There is a oneness in the human family that we deny at our peril. Being with the suffering poor is not optional. Jesus himself said that whatever we do or fail to do for the hungry or sick or imprisoned or destitute, we do or fail to do for him. Why would Christ use such a measurement? Perhaps because being with those who completely and utterly have no physical means of support causes us to ask life-altering questions: Am I taking God seriously? What difference does God make for a world with such need? What does God wish I would be about in my one brief life? If I really believe that "God so loved the world" that Jesus was willing to die for it, am I willing to risk my pride, my self-esteem, my security, my comfort in order to immerse myself completely in loving service to this world? Do I care enough about the things that matter the most to God?" ■

Sources for this article include numerous conversations between Jeff Bailey and Gordon Cosby, taped sermons, an interview with Gordon and Mary Cosby in Sojourners magazine (Vol. 26, No. 4), and various written material from the Church of the Saviour.

>> COMING UP IN THE NEXT ISSUE OF CUTTING EDGE >>> WORSHIP AND THE ARTS

Carol Wimber talks with us about worship in the early days of the Vineyard—and reminds us of some things we don't want to lose sight of.

John Willison, worship pastor at the Evanston Vineyard—who has written such songs as *For I Know My Redeemer Lives* and *Jesus, I Believe You*—gives insightful, practical advice to church planters wanting to start worship off on the right foot in their church.

We discuss the discipline of prayer with Phyllis Tickle, Religion Editor for *Publishers Weekly*, a frequent commentator on religion for *The New York Times* and CNN, and the author of many books, including *The Divine Hours: A Manual for Prayer.*

We talk with Dr. William Dyrness, professor of Theology and Culture at Fuller Theological Seminary, about his new book, *Visual Faith*, and about the role of visual arts and media in worship.

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