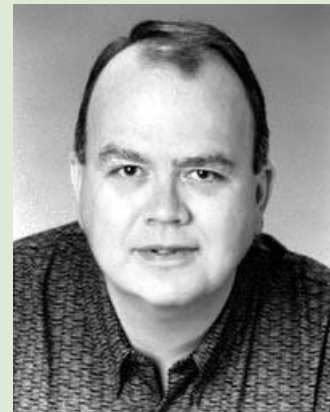


April 2010

Radical Hospitality

by Tom Wilkinson, Vice President, Development

If you're like me, you get a lot of email forwarded by family and friends, some of it of dubious origin or authenticity. I received such a message last week from a friend of mine, a retired clergy member of the Florida Conference. It was a compelling story, but seemed too good to be true. But I was intrigued, so I checked it out, and found it was from the Associated Press, about as trusted a source as there is.



"It would be embarrassing if it were not so humbling," writes Peter Prengaman, an AP editor, reporting on the recent mine disaster in West Virginia. "Hours after the mine explosion, scores of journalists from all over the country started arriving - in a very rural area with no communications or places to sleep closer than an hour's drive away.

"When the governor began giving press briefings at Marsh Fork Elementary School, journalists began getting comfortable at the site a few miles from the mine entrance, and we never left. By [the next day], a couple dozen satellite trucks filled the parking lot, and classrooms with tiny chairs and paintings on the walls were turned into newsrooms and bedrooms.

"And all of a sudden there was food - a lot of food. Pepperoni Pizza. Pulled pork and beans. Fried chicken, potatoes and green beans. Cookies. Crackers. Doughnuts of all stripes. The food was cooked by residents and donated by businesses in this community. Some of it came by way of a local Red Cross, a Wal-Mart and a United Way, but even more was the home cooking of kind West Virginians who just wanted to take care of us."

"Imagine, here we are, an aggressive and hard-charging bunch of journalists in the middle of this devastated community, and it's THEY who are taking care of US!"

I'd hazard a guess that some of those home cooks were United Methodists, schooled in the way of "Radical Hospitality," one of the five practices of fruitful United Methodist congregations identified by Bishop Robert Schnase of Missouri.



This is a column about stewardship, or "Extravagant Generosity," to use Bishop Schnase's term. But when you think about it, hospitality is just one component of holistic, integrated Christian stewardship. Sharing. Caring about others, following Jesus' admonition that when "you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." (Matthew 25:40)

Yet these West Virginians, in the midst of their profound loss and grief, turned it upside down. The sufferers became the servants.

Pregaman continues, "The kindness hasn't been lost on any of us. When I asked [the] interim principal how folks could be so giving at a time like this, she said that many felt it was soothing to help others. This situation made them feel helpless, and helping others was doing something. She also said it gave people a chance to show the world what West Virginians are 'really like.'"

"Often on TV, we are not portrayed in such a good manner. We often are portrayed as ignorant and backward,' she said. 'But we are just ordinary people who live ordinary lives.'"

God has a habit of using ordinary people to accomplish amazing things. The Bible is full of their stories. Consider Abraham, an elderly itinerant, whom God called to become the father of three great religions. Consider Mary, an unwed, pregnant teenager whom God called to become the mother of Jesus. And in our own time, consider Martin Luther King, Jr., an obscure Baptist preacher, whom God called to lead us into greater equality and freedom, a work still in progress.

Consider each of us, ordinary people living ordinary lives, whom God calls to serve others. It can be as small and simple as baking a batch of cookies for strangers in town.

Pregaman concludes, "Ordinary people who live ordinary lives? I have to disagree. These people are extraordinary."

* * * * *

As the stewardship voice of the Florida Conference, the Foundation is ready to help you, your family and your church with anything related to comprehensive Christian stewardship. For more information please call, click or write us at 1-866-363-9673 toll-free; www.fumf.org; or PO Box 3549, Lakeland, FL 33802.