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# WHEN ALL GOD'S 'CHILLEN' GET SHOES

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**The white pastor of a little black church tells what happened when a few church members decided you don't have to be big to do big things for the Lord.**

Sometimes there is hardly time to listen before God says, "It's time to act!" Just a few weeks after I became pastor of Messiah Presbyterian Church in Lubbock, Texas, I received a letter from nearby Iles Elementary School inviting me to join community leaders to discuss how their constituencies could be more involved with the school.

The principal opened by announcing the goal of the session: to figure out how to protect the school population from encroaching drugs and gang leaders. Then the teachers spoke, one by one. A sixth-grade teacher said one of his students was running drugs. The child was making \$1,000 a week. He had just bought his mother a car and paid cash, and he

told his teacher that in a year or two he'd be able to buy her a house.

"No," his teacher told him, "I am afraid you won't live that long." The boy looked at his teacher as if he knew it was true—all the more reason to accumulate as much as possible now.

The story that haunted my mem-

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Model: James Bullard Photos by Dennis Crews

ory most, though, was told by a mild-mannered white teacher who taught second grade. He had a boy in his class who was a lookout for a drug dealer. The child was from a poor family, but now he was wearing expensive athletic shoes. The kids in his classroom were suddenly impressed. The teacher was concerned.

“What can I do with this kid?” he

said, half to himself and half to the rest of us. “He’s only seven years old. He doesn’t even completely understand what he’s doing. He thinks he’s making a good choice when he’s really making a bad one.”

That afternoon at home I could not get out of my mind a second-grader with the shoes every kid dreams of, running into a life of gangs

and drugs and crime with no awareness of any better way to live. As the white pastor of this black Presbyterian church, I knew that my tiny church must see God do big things in Lubbock.

### Two Worlds

Messiah Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has 21 adult members, eight children, and a constituency of 43 in an essentially segregated city of 200,000 people. Blacks make up less than nine percent (about 17,000 people) of the population of Lubbock. The city lies in a region so rugged it could not be settled until the development of windmills, barbed wire, and the six-shooter.

West Texas is characteristically hard on women, the weak, and minorities. I had been living on the white side of town for five years when I began to serve Messiah (my husband was the pastor of the largest Presbyterian church in the city). It is no exaggeration to say that Messiah Church and I were from two different worlds, and even in the best of circumstances, merging these worlds can be complicated for both blacks and whites.

In January 1994, members of Messiah asked me to help provide



worship leadership. Their black pastor had left, and I became their part-time pastor a few months later, serving a congregation of 17 adults.

Immediately I came to grips with two issues. First, my life and experience had been very different from my congregation's. This was more than a matter of race. It was also education,

socioeconomic status, regional upbringing, and even experiences of faith. Second, how would I be at Messiah—and who would I be?

To address the first issue I adopted the rule of a good pastor; namely, to try to relate my own life to theirs. Some experiences are common to almost all people, with some variations: falling in love, getting married, having and rearing children, finding and making a home, burying one's parents, paying taxes. So I began my pastorate by emphasizing what we had in common as brothers and sisters in Christ and in life.

As I did that, a surprising thing happened to me. I began to identify with their struggles as African-Americans, which were not really my struggles. I began to hear my white counterparts and colleagues differently as they talked about racial

issues. I began to become conscious, somewhere deep inside of me, of the nuances of racism. I worked on remembering how alike we were, and I discovered that is the key reason prejudice and racism hurt so much: *Because we are so much alike!*

The second issue had to do with how “careful” I should be. Should I watch what I say? Should I say I “understand” what I can never really understand? Should I try to put on “black skin”?

The only sensible answer was to be myself, which meant remembering who I was. I had to remember that I was the person who had put on my first dossier years earlier that I was willing to serve a congregation of another race. I had to remember that I was the person who had been the only friend of a 5-year-old black boy in my kindergarten class because my mother had lectured me on racism when this little boy entered our class in 1950. I remembered that in 1968 my husband and I were the only whites who stopped on an Alabama road to help a black family who had been in a head-on collision with a “white” car, and that two ambulances left empty because they did not carry blacks. Things I had never thought much about now became memories that provided me with an identity in my pastorate.

Of course, I also remembered that I was a middle-aged Yankee woman in a mainline denomination who had

enjoyed a life of privilege, especially compared to the Messiah congregation. My willingness to be real in my relationship with the congregation opened the door for the congregation to be the same with me.

### Shoes for the Righteous

In an adult Sunday school class early in my pastorate, I had the benefit of listening to members of my congregation as they explored the sensitive issues of racism in their own experience. I sat back and took notes. It was a gift beyond all gifts for my ministry.

I heard stories that I had never even imagined before. I saw tears in the eyes of some of the most dignified and decent people I have ever known. As a result, I learned something about what hatred and injustice and racism can do to the human heart. To hear these stories so early in the pastorate was a great advantage to me because it helped me grow in understanding. It also reinforced my belief in the importance of listening carefully to people before daring to think you might understand them.

So, how to approach the problem of the expensive athletic shoes bought with drug money and so admired by classmates?

The week after the school meeting at which I became aware of drugs and shoes, I met with Messiah’s six elders. We sat at a long table,

stretched down the center aisle of the sanctuary. Three of the elders were women, among them 86-year-old Bettie Iles, a widow for 20 years. She had not completely recovered from a serious fall occasioned by a stroke. Her dad had been a preacher and had helped to plant Messiah Church. In the late 1950s Bettie had been one of the first women ordained as an elder in the Presbyterian Church. Now she used a walker and no longer could speak plainly. But her eyes were telling. The Holy Spirit was real for Bettie.

I told the elders about the meeting at Iles Elementary School, and that I felt led to make a proposal: Messiah Church would help the school by supplying an incentive for kids to make right choices instead of wrong ones. We would offer three kids in each classroom each semester a pair of the best athletic shoes money could buy, if they made right choices by excelling in school. We would reward children for being outstanding in their classrooms, be it for scholastics or citizenship or athletics. Iles Elementary had 17 classrooms, so that meant 51 pairs of shoes a semester or 102 pairs of shoes a year. It would cost \$10,000. They were silent. I knew and they knew that we didn't have the money. "We will raise the money," I said.

I knew what they were thinking. Messiah had a tiny budget, and there were times when the utility bills could

hardly be paid. My salary was paid by the presbytery. The "extra" funds for the church came from my husband's congregation, which sent Messiah its fifth-Sunday loose-change offering, usually between \$60 and \$80.

"Of course," I continued, "I've never raised that much money before." I had to be honest. More silence.

"We should pray," Bettie struggled to say. After praying, we looked up and saw Bettie's eyes were bright.

"I think the Lord means for us to do this," said Don, an elder everyone listened to. It was moved and seconded. (Presbyterians follow Robert's Rules of Order even in the midst of the movement of the Holy Spirit!) The vote was affirmative. Messiah, a tiny church on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, had just caught a glimpse of God's vision for his kingdom—and voted to go with it.

Not an elder there could have come up with that kind of money. It would have to come strictly by faith. We contacted the school's officials, shared the plan, and asked if they were interested. "Are you kidding?" they said. "Of course we're interested, but how can you do it?"

"Only with God's help," we said. We weren't kidding!

This is not one of those stories in which we immediately went to the mailbox and found a check for \$10,000. We began by calling FootLocker and Kids FootLocker (owned



by Kinney Shoes). They thought it was such a wonderful idea that they promised an initial discount of 15 percent and 25 percent at the respective stores. With encouragement from denominational leaders, the Presbyterian Shoes Ministry hit the road running!

### **Junky Shoes?**

We announced the honors during a school assembly at the end of the first semester. "Everybody around here knows that you can make a lot of money doing the wrong thing," I said

to the children. They looked surprised that I would speak the truth.

"But these shoes are for kids who are choosing to do the right thing. In the end, more good will come to you for making right choices. And we are here to show you that is true. When you go into FootLocker or Kids FootLocker, you pick out any pair of shoes you want—any pair—because you have done the right thing. Everyone who does the right thing is a winner!"

The names were called out: Shamika Jones, Steve Wells, Soli Ramirez, Tameka Eddington, Aashu-

antis Johnson, Amber Fair, Nyquisha McConic, Hillary Hutchinson, and so on. The children came down from the bleachers to receive their certificates, handed to them with congratulations by the elders of Messiah. Then each child stood before the whole assembly, publicly identified as a winner.

A week later, one of the sixth-grade teachers told me that after the assembly, the other kids in her classroom said to the winners: "You just wait. When you get into that shoe store, you won't be able to get whatever you want. There'll be some cheap, junky shoe."

#### Footwear for Winners

That afternoon and evening, 40 of the 50 winners went to the mall to get their shoes. The FootLocker managers told me each child who came in had the same question: "Can I get anything I want? Anything?" The managers replied as we had asked them to reply: "Yes, you can, because you are a winner."

The next day in school, the principal said her office was nearly overrun with kids who wanted to show her their wonder-

ful new shoes. She said the whole school was in celebration. For the first time in my life I saw my Lord in black skin, and in my heart I praised him!

A short time later, we received a letter from a mother of twin boys who had won shoes from different classrooms. It read, "I have 11 children. You cannot imagine what a blessing it is to have my two boys have new shoes. God bless you, Messiah." Although those kids may have received shoes, and their harried, worried parents got a financial break, the people who were really blessed were the folks of Messiah.

When the Associated Press picked up the story of the little church that

was doing so much for schoolchildren, articles appeared in newspapers all over the world. Then money did start pouring in. Two dollar bills crumpled up in an envelope came with a note written by an apparently arthritic hand that read, "Keep up the ministry for the kids!" A check for \$750 from a colonel in the Air Force in Italy arrived with the note, "I read about your ministry in the *Stars and Stripes* newspaper. Keep up the ministry





for the kids!"

Since then, the Messiah elders have stood before several school assemblies to award certificates for shoes. In addition, the session adopted another elementary school. We began to be known in the city as the little church that has a heart for kids on the east side. We bought hundreds of pairs of top-quality shoes. Two years after that first meeting, we did receive a check for \$10,000—from the national Presbyterian Women's organization. We had written them, "We don't believe we have to be big to do big things for the Kingdom of God." Enclosing the check, they wrote back, "Neither do we!" I asked myself, Why am I so surprised? Didn't I always believe that God could do amazing things? Yes. But I was never more certain than I was after I had "met Messiah."

### Theology From Below

In fact, I learned much about theology while at Messiah. For instance, in regard to historic slavery as a metaphor for "discipleship," I learned that it is a lot easier to call yourself a slave for Christ when there is no memory of slavery in your family. How I admire those who are able to embrace this concept without being glib or false but who know that being a slave for Christ is to belong to the one Master who will always redeem us. As for "social pain and the Exodus story," I nod toward

the stories that have been shared by the women in my church.

Unlike them, I have never been told that I could not try on a dress in a store or been escorted by the clerk to the very last dressing room. I do not know what it means to be constantly watched when I am shopping.

Social pain cuts deep into the life of Messiah's people, and it interferes with trust and interaction among the races in ways that I am only beginning to understand. Once in a while I get a glimpse of understanding, and then I realize it is no wonder that there exists a desire to "exodus." The black community is indeed a "community of the diaspora."

### Rodrick Pays the Price

The cycle of poverty and injustice was at least dented on one occasion. One of the children in my church, a sixth-grader whom I will call Rodrick, got into trouble at school. A Hispanic boy in his class called Rodrick the "N" word. He responded by pushing the boy off his chair. Both boys were sent to the principal's office. The principal was new and white. She had the school police give Rodrick a ticket.

When his grandmother called me, I drove over to see what he had been given, which turned out to be like a traffic ticket. We called juvenile court and found out Rodrick had to appear in court. We were told that the lowest fine was \$200. At the request of

Rodrick's grandmother, I spoke to the principal. She informed me that Rodrick had been getting into "scuffles" at school. I asked to see the reports about previous punishments for his supposed scuffles. The principal was unable to find a report saying he had been expelled or even been sent to school-based detention. She realized she had mistakenly labeled Rodrick a troublemaker.

Nevertheless, she said, he was going to have to pay the price. I explained that if Rodrick got a \$200 fine, the family would be in a financial crisis. Rodrick's grandmother seldom used her clothes dryer, which she had bought with insurance money after the death of one of her children, because she could not afford to pay the power bill.

Would the principal rescind the ticket on the basis of her own error? No. She told me she could not do that. I later discovered that she could. Would the principal consider coming to court to speak to the judge on Rodrick's behalf? Yes. But she had many meetings, and it would have to be convenient. As it turned out, it was not convenient. Rodrick made not one but two trips to the courthouse. One judge, however, was impressed by the many church members at the courthouse to support him, and declined to impose any monetary fine. Rodrick's punishment was to do 20 good deeds in his neighborhood within one month.

Rodrick suffered through this situation in a way that a 12-year-old child who had been provoked into a foolish scuffle should not have had to endure. If Rodrick had come from a powerful family, if Rodrick had been influential, and most likely if Rodrick had not been black, he never would have been in court for such a childish offense.

An impoverished grandmother rearing four grandchildren, and trying against all odds to provide a decent home so that these children "won't be poor like I was," is banking everything on their having a chance in life. My guess is that Rodricks are everywhere in our society. They need the church's prayers and support.

It is eye-opening to be with people who are not using their clothes dryer because it is too expensive to run. It is eye-opening to be with families who have loved ones in prison due to crimes related to their poverty; to witness grandmothers' and mothers' hand-wringing concern over whether their young boys will stay alive; to realize that many of the families in my church have been touched by murder; to discover that poverty has its own rules and its own world.

### One of Ours

Once, when seeing a black conductor at a concert, a member of Messiah leaned over to me and said, "Now, there's one of ours!" I have come to believe that, in the most pro-

found sense, being able to tell each other “There’s one of ours,” whatever their color or socioeconomic status, is a tremendous testimony to the power of Jesus Christ to bring us together in his body, the church.

The reality of this spiritual family hit me in another way in a small general store near the church. In its crowded aisles merchandise was piled from floor to ceiling. Waiting at the counter to be helped, I looked down and saw a large framed picture of a powerful black man. His long hair was braided, and he was sitting, surrounded by children. Black chil-

dren! All around him—on his lap and at his feet and side.

I stepped back to get a better look. Was it Martin Luther King, a likely surmise? Something deep inside me impelled me to look again—and to see. For the first time in my life, I saw my Lord in black skin, and in my heart I praised him.

When I first came to Messiah, I drove to another part of town and found strange people who differed from me. But after meeting and knowing Messiah, I find something has happened—and I am at home in a new way in God’s world. □

## THE EAST END OF HEAVEN

**A**fter I finished a recent lecture on the Last Judgment and the Final Reconciliation, an African-American student approached me. “Do you know what you are saying?” she asked, visibly disturbed.

I guessed immediately what she was thinking. Many masters of her enslaved ancestors were “good” Christians, and she may see them one day in heaven.

“I know,” I responded, “and it is scandalous, isn’t it?” If I were her, I thought, I know what I would want to do at the Pearly Gates. If the slave owner was settled in the East End of heaven, I would not budge until Peter assigned me to the West End, and I would certainly refuse sitting at the same table with him at any of the heavenly banquets. She—and I along with her—was troubled by the thought of the Final Reconciliation.

“But if it were otherwise,” she said after a while, more to herself than to me, “heaven would not be heaven.” And a spark of hope appeared in her pensive eyes.—*Miroslav Volk in “Love Your Heavenly Enemy,” Christianity Today, October 23, 2000.*