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A LEGACY OF SERVICE

DR. JIM MANKIN



Dr. Mankin serves as the Director of the Institute for Christian Leadership at Abilene Christian University. Prior to coming to Abilene he worked with the Madison Church of Christ in Nashville. He used his work there as a springboard for a Doctor of Ministry dissertation at Fuller Theological Seminary, **The Role of Social Service in the Life and Growth of the Madison Church of Christ, 1986**. In addition to a description of the vast and varied concern Madison demonstrated for the community, Dr. Mankin places Madison's ministries in a historical context of concern for ministry to the poor in the churches of Christ.

Especially interesting in Mankin's work are his descriptions of the Russell Street and Central churches in Nashville during the 1920's. These were congregations truly concerned with the plight of the poor. Mankin maintains that Madison's ministries grow from a legacy of service established by these pioneering congregations. Dr. Mankin discusses these and other matters of concern in ministering to the poor in the following interview.

Churches of Christ have been susceptible to the charge that we have not been involved in social concerns, that we have opted for "saving souls instead of saving lives," and yet your work and your research seems to indicate that there has been a strand within our tradition that has been very active in social ministry. Discuss a little bit where that strand comes from.

Alright. I think sometimes that charge is not totally accurate. There is a tradition in the Restoration Movement showing that we have helped people. It begins back in 1884 with an orphans' home that was started by a woman, Miss Ginny Clark, here at Luling, Texas. She pretty much operated the home out of her own resources. She bought the land, some 14 acres, built a house, and took in children. Later, she got G. H. P. Showalter from **Firm Foundation** on the board, and he solicited money through the paper. One of the big times every year was to send money on her birthday. Over in Tennessee, in 1909, they started the

Tennessee Orphans' Home, first at Columbia, Tennessee, then it moved to Springhill, not far away. So there was some early help with orphans, homeless children, in those early days. Boles Home started in 1925, maybe 1924, on Thanksgiving Day. That property was donated.

But I think one of the most interesting things that I have found was the Central Church in Nashville. This congregation started as a new congregation in downtown Nashville on 5th Avenue, or right off of 5th Avenue, in 1925. One of the prime movers of the Central congregation was A. M. Burton, who was president and founder of Life and Casualty Insurance Company. Burton, and those who worked with him to form this downtown congregation, had as the very definite theme of that church and their ministry that they would do things in a social way. They built an unusual building of several stories. As I recall, maybe five stories, with part of that being classrooms and part of it being facilities to house young men who came to Nashville to work and to live. They had daily services,

preached on the radio every day at noon, had services, and had lunch served. They built a separate building for girls. When I was a student at Lipscomb in the mid-50's the girls home was still in operation. I even knew a girl who stayed there. She was from a small rural congregation, and her parents didn't feel safe about her going to a big city. But she could live in the Central Home for Girls.

The interesting thing about that congregation was that they also provided social services. They had some medical facilities, you know, with doctors and nurses that would be on call. They had a day care program long before it was called that. They served these meals and had an extensive food and clothing room. The pulpit preacher at Central was Hall Calhoun, a very well-known preacher who had a PhD from Harvard. E.W. McMillan also preached there. Now, the congregation is still there and is doing some things, but they certainly have cut back a lot from what they were doing during the 30's and 40's and 50's.

In your project you suggest that maybe some of this comes directly from the influence of David Lipscomb.

Yes, I think David Lipscomb had a very soft place in his heart for benevolence and helping poor people. He appealed through the pages of **Gospel Advocate** for brethren to send money to help some of the people in the South, and at that time raised \$100,000 which is a tremendous amount of money for people who were destitute and hurt.

Now, another very prominent preacher in Nashville during those days was S. H. Hall who preached for the Russell Street Church. I believe he was there 28 years as the preacher. This church even had a clinic to service their community. They had certain days of the week when dentists would come by. There were doctors and a nurse on duty. These two congregations, Central and Russell Street, probably were no more than three miles apart. I really think there is a direct relationship to what these churches were doing and what Madison was able to do. The Madison Church started in 1934 and was kind of an outgrowth in some ways of a community concern that was beginning to grow, and some of the people from Russell Street came out there.

Why don't you describe from your vantage point what some of the keys have been to the success of social ministries at the Madison Church?

I think at Madison the underlying idea of the social service program has been that we want to practice what we preach, that we're taking seriously the advice given in James 1:27 that we practice pure and

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undefiled religion to those widows and orphans. Up until that time, Madison, like most congregations of the Churches of Christ, had been spending about 3% of their budget on benevolence. In the late 50's, they started talking about a child care program with homes that would be built on property they owned. Each home had a momma and a papa with children there and a social worker who was overseeing all this. This galvanized that church because they began to then raise money to build these homes, which they built for about \$45,000-\$50,000.

The attention of the community was soon centered on a church that was doing what they say the New Testament church is all about. In those first few years, they opened two homes in a relatively short time, just months apart, and then each year thereafter they opened a home until they had a total of six. Now, the good part is the contributions for missions and local expenses were still being taken care of and met. All of this money given for child care and benevolence was in addition. The people became excited. They could see the children. They knew the house parents.

So you think one of the keys may have been the immediacy, the personal contact that went on between them and . . .

Right, and see there became an involvement that led to several other natural things. For instance, we have these children, 40 or 50 over here in our care. These house parents need some relief. So from that started the Tuesday/Thursday school, which then was opened up to other members of the church and people in the community. From that other needs began to be assessed. What can we do to serve the people of this community and let them know we are the church? We are a church which has a heart, we love people, we love their souls, but we also love to take care of them. Meals on Wheels began as a volunteer program without government assistance to take meals into homes. This involved people cooking, people delivering the food -- our involvement in the community continued to increase.

The Madison folks were the kind that would just roll up their sleeves and do the work. Brother

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North used to say the beauty of the Madison Church was that there were more people willing to be Indians than chiefs.

Ira North was definitely one of the keys to the success of the Madison ministry. Talk a little bit about Ira North's vision and compassion, his sense of what the church ought to be doing, and the benefits of ministry to the world.

I think Ira North was one of the most remarkable men I've ever known. He was very enthusiastic. He was a catalyst for good works and could dream and plan and see the big picture. Now, he also had the remarkable facility of thinking up something -- the dream -- and then turning it over to others to operate and administer and carry on. He was a great encourager. He would build up the people involved, noticing how many hours they were giving, how much work they were doing, how this was for the glory of God and the good of humanity. So people bought into this dream, and the elders saw it, and when a church starts growing people start coming in and everyone gets excited.

Brother North was also a man that liked to be on the cutting edge of things. He knew a lot of people in public service. He would go down and talk to the people at the social service department or he'd be on a committee, or he knew the mayor, he knew the governor, and he would find from them resources and people that could help. He would turn this over to benefit the church.

Some of the stories were almost more than you could imagine of lives that were changed and touched. Some of the Madison members adopted children. One of our neighbors, across the street from where we lived in Madison, adopted a boy from the Madison Children's Home, and then they had a son of their own. They loved the adopted boy as much as their natural son. Now he's finishing up his medical degree. Well, here's a family that became personally involved. I've never seen a congregation where as many people were personally involved. A lot of people write a check but they don't want to do the work. At Madison, they were willing to

go do the work, whether it was clean out gutters or paint or mow lawns or help plant a garden, because all of this in some way was going to be for the glory of God and the good of humanity. There was this spirit of the whole mission of the church is to love people and help people in order to save them.

Now, my major professor at Fuller who read the dissertation said that he had not seen many evangelistic churches that were that heavily involved in benevolence, as if there has to be an either/or. So I know that there can be a blending. A key word with Ira North was the word balance. He probably said that over and over before he ever wrote his book. As he would put it, "The New Testament Church, the Jerusalem church, must emphasize evangelism, edification, and benevolence."

Maybe the success is not so much the ability of Ira North and the people at Madison to put together a great nuts-and-bolts program, though they did, but the dream and the ability and freedom to dream was a key to the success.

Right. In fact, I think that was one of the great strengths of that church - they didn't mind dreaming. For many years we had what was called Operation Forward. Every member was invited to come. You came with your dream. We were often reminded, "Now, remember it's not Operation Backward, so don't tell what we have done, tell us what you'd like to do. Dream and dream big." Sometimes they were simple suggestions; sometimes they were pretty thought-provoking and earth shaking. That didn't mean you could implement them that year or the next, but there was always that something to look forward to. A number of years ago Brother North launched every year what he called "Sputnik" based on the Russian Sputnik. That was to be the one big idea. That was always one that had been approved by the elders. He kind of launched it as if to say all these suggestions are good but let's look at something the whole church can get excited about. So many of the programs were started that way. This is one of the sad things today in the church. I don't go to many churches that I feel are dreaming dreams. In fact, a lot of them don't even know why they exist, what they're about.

It's obvious that those ministries at Madison were exciting. People may read this issue and this interview and get excited, perhaps, even to dream some things. Let's say that a young minister starting a new work wants to get a congregation involved in ministry with the poor. Where does he start?

Well, I think you have to look first and see what is needed in your community. If I were starting today

in that situation, I believe I would look at how we could relate to people that have a chemical dependency. That's a great need in our time. Few of us in the church have the training or expertise, but I think we could get it, and I think we would be amazed at how many community sources we'd find. I think you have to look at the situation where you are, the context, and find the need that you can meet which makes the congregation unique and special.

Let's say then that the congregation gets its dream off the ground, and things go well for the first four or five months, and everyone is excited about it. Then about eight or nine months down the road people aren't quite as excited, the newness has rubbed off. What is the task of leadership in keeping the dream kindled?

You know, the real key to keeping this dream alive, I think, is to have committed people. You have to sell them on the fact that it is their dream rather than just your dream or just the leaders', and if they're really convinced and convicted, it is amazing how they can stick to that and work and plan. Sometimes we don't give them the freedom to change or to grow with that dream. Now, it's going to be human nature that some people are going to drop by the wayside and be tired or weary or maybe their interest wanes because they have something else they'd like to work on. But when you get enough people who see this benevolence as a real key to the growth spiritually and even ultimately for the saving of souls, they will really amaze you how much they can do. For instance, the child care program at Madison had the same chairman for 25 years. He was a medical doctor in the community. He committed himself to that program and came by the church building every day to check and find what was needed, how he could help, what needed to be done. He gave free medical service to all the children. Now, that kind of dedication, see, that became his dream, his work for the Lord, his service.

Some churches become overwhelmed, especially small churches, with the great things that some of the large churches in our movement do. How can they be faithful? What suggestions would you provide small churches for participating in the task of ministry with the poor?

I think that's always a problem. We look at the big church like Madison and think, "we can't do that." But Madison wasn't nearly as big when they started this. You can be any size and have a program of work. You can help people and you can serve. It may be that you want to take a work that would be on a much smaller scale such as unwed mothers. There would be people in the congregation that could use that as a real

ministry. Does it matter if we help one or ten? We could have a viable program of feeding those that are shut-ins, destitute. You could take a meal to five the same as you could to fifty. I think sometimes because we can't do all this and we can't do the big things we are afraid to do the little things. As far as I know, every church could have a food room and a clothing room. Now, the problem is having someone to staff it so that it's available to people. But if you'll look in the community and find what is needed... Perhaps you could work in connection with a public school for the latchkey kids. I remember years ago when I was a youth minister we did a program one day after school, and the children from two public schools near by came to our building. We had recreation and Bible study and refreshments, and we kept them until time for their parents to be home. I didn't know the term latchkey then, but we had an entree through a teacher in each of these schools. We built that program up until I was having around 100. So there's always something that a church of any size can do.

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I know the thing that the benevolence committee at the church that I work with struggles with most is the effectiveness of their ministry. Many times it becomes obvious that our assistance has become a detriment, has become something that is perpetuating the problem. What types of things can we consider to insure that our ministries are transforming?

I think that's always a hard problem. At Madison, we always had a survey, a questionnaire that we filled out to find their needs, and their children's sizes and all that. We didn't want it to just be a form to be filled out. After it was filled out we kept it on file so that we would know when we helped and how often they came. But we also at that point had the person who was helping talk to them about the church and the fact that we'd love for them to come. We wanted them to bring their children to Sunday Schools. That's one

reason we provided the clothing, that's the reason we gave them food... That's where you need a person who is very sensitive and can talk to these people. The Lord told us if we help one of the least of these it's the same as helping him.

So you would say, then, that it is better to err on the side of assistance and generosity than on the side of cutting people off.

Oh, yes, very definitely. In fact, we cannot be self-righteous. This month I may be fine, but next month I may be the one that needs the help. If I can't turn to my Christian brothers and sisters in the family, where am I going to turn? We've got to be compassionate and sensitive and loving and feel that this person has dignity. Now, I'm willing to say that sometimes you have to go to them and help them with very ordinary things. Sometimes they may need soap and water more than they need money. Sometimes they need medica-

tion. We generally had a policy - we didn't just give somebody the money that we didn't know, but we would take them over and buy them the meal or we would fill their car with gas... It all takes time. All of our works should not be done for the glory it brings to us... we need to be the hands and feet of Christ in the world today.

Do you have a concluding remark?

Well, I just feel like we need to be more sympathetic and compassionate. People are sometimes tired of hearing what we say. Most of them already know what we believe. I have found they may not like our doctrine, but they will love our actions. When you practice benevolence, real Christianity, they will come around to loving what we say.

*Hope has two beautiful daughters.
Their names are anger and courage:
anger at the way things are, and cour-
age to see that they do not remain the
way they are.*

Augustine
