

Service and Mission

Summary: Some Christians understand their faith to be a call to action for social justice. As members of a “mission” community, these Christians go into the world to create new church communities, address political and social issues, and meet immediate human needs, providing food, housing, and healthcare.

Every day of the year in the heart of Atlanta, the members of Clifton Sanctuary Ministries put faith into action as the former church building opens its doors as a night shelter for homeless men. The church building, the former site of Clifton Presbyterian Church, is a simple house just east of downtown Atlanta. When the ministry to individuals experiencing homelessness began in 1979, there was no pipe organ, no polished wood pews, no altar filled with flowers. Folding chairs were set up in the main room on Sundays for the small congregation of some 50 people to worship together. And every night of the week, the same space was filled with cots for about 30 homeless men who come at 6:00 p.m. for dinner and a night’s rest. As former pastor, Carrie Burris, puts it, “That space really serves as a sanctuary in two ways: a physical sanctuary for our guests and a spiritual sanctuary for them and us. What we try to offer here is some kind of loving acceptance and a friend’s hospitality. The world out there treats them like garbage, as nothing, as worthless. Here they are valued and treated as human beings.” Clifton Presbyterian Church closed its doors in 2003 but it is outlived by the ministry it founded, a ministry of housing and hospitality that now organizes volunteers from over 26 partner organizations.

“It’s just central to the Gospel,” as one Christian volunteer put it. “Service to others is not optional. Jesus says in Matthew 25, ‘I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ The disciples asked him, ‘When did we see you hungry or thirsty, a stranger or a prisoner?’ And Jesus said, ‘Truly, as you did it to one of these least of these brothers and sisters, you did it to me.’ This is what the mission of the church is all about.”

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), like most American denominations, has a wide range of service and mission projects. In the mid-1990s, Nancy Anne Dawe wrote about her experiences at a work camp in West Virginia started by a Catholic priest and a Presbyterian minister: “We discovered that educational backgrounds didn’t matter nor did economic circumstances. For both Appalachians and work campers,

love mattered. That was all. We bonded like chemical atoms in relationships of sincerity and trust.” The Living History project of the Presbyterian Historical Society began in 2011 with the recording of the life histories of former missionaries now living in Philadelphia, a project that continues to document the many ways in which Presbyterians live out their faith through service and mission to the world.

Many of these service projects are in response to disasters. After Superstorm Sandy ravished New Jersey and the metropolitan New York City area in October 2012, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod Disaster Response Team produced a series of short videos that documented the variety of ways volunteers from LCMS congregations around the nation were involved in recovery efforts. When Hurricane Andrew slammed into south Florida in 1992, teams included plumbers, carpenters, electricians, and unskilled volunteers from Christ Presbyterian Church in Canton, Ohio arrived to help repair houses for people who were uninsured. One volunteer, a pediatric dentist, called himself a “hammer missionary,” contributing “reconstruction and Christian love” in the face of devastation. As a result of her experience in this community of service, one young volunteer was baptized as a Christian. “We were not just rebuilding homes,” she said, “but rebuilding lives.”

In 2011 the Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America approved a campaign to “make malaria history.” In collaboration with eleven Lutheran churches in Africa, the ELCA works to train healthcare providers, offer preventive medication, support the procurement of clean water and mosquito nets, and educate communities about the disease.

The Christian church understands itself to be a “mission” community, which means literally that it is a community “sent” into the world. The church does not exist for itself alone and cannot live unto itself, but is sent to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ in word and in deed. Christians understand the teachings of Christ and the gift of salvation in Christ to be universal, so Christian missions have followed Christ’s words to go into all the world and “make disciples of all nations.” The church, following Christ, is not limited to a single people or ethnicity, but has crossed the boundaries of nation, class, and ethnicity.

At home and abroad, Christian missions have brought new church communities into being, established schools and hospitals, worked to meet immediate human needs, and sought to challenge the political and economic structures that continued to create poverty, violence, and injustice. The Protest Chaplains at

Harvard Divinity School was founded in September 2011 at the Occupy Wall Street protest in New York City; its members were instrumental in organizing Occupy Boston efforts and are one example of how many Christians—often alongside and in collaboration with people of different faiths—understand their testimony to Christ is strongest when faith becomes action in service to others.