If you ask most people what Christians believe, they can tell you, "Christians believe that Jesus is God's Son and that Jesus rose from the dead." But if you ask the average person how Christians live, they are struck silent. We have not shown the world another way of doing life. Christians pretty much live like everybody else; they just sprinkle a little Jesus in along the way. And doctrine is not very attractive, even if it's true. Few people are interested in a religion that has nothing to say to the world and offers them only life after death, when what people are really wondering is whether there is life before death.

As my teacher Tony Campolo used to ask, "Even if there were no heaven and there were no hell, would you still follow Jesus? Would you follow him for the life, joy, and fulfillment he gives you right now?" I am more and more convinced each day that I would. Don't get me wrong. I'm excited about the afterlife. We are going to party like there's no tomorrow (umm, and there won't be). And yet I am convinced that Jesus came not just to prepare us to die but to teach us how to live. Otherwise, much of Jesus' wisdom would prove quite unnecessary for the afterlife. After all, how hard could it be to love our enemies in heaven? And the kingdom that Jesus speaks so much about is not just something we hope for after we die but is something we are to incarnate now. Jesus says the kingdom is "within us," "among us," "at hand," and we are to pray...
resulting powerful fusion can change the world. But that collision rarely happens. I could feel it happening inside of me. One of my punk-rock friends asked me why so many rich people like talking to me, and I said because I'm nice to them. He asked why I was nice to them. I said because I can see myself in them. That gives me a little patience and grace. I long for the Calcutta slums to meet the Chicago suburbs, for lepers to meet landowners and for each to see God's image in the other. It's no wonder that the footsteps of Jesus lead from the tax collectors to the lepers. I truly believe that when the poor meet the rich, riches will have no meaning. And when the rich meet the poor, we will see poverty come to an end.
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that it comes “on earth as it is in heaven.” No wonder the early Christian church was known as the Way. It was a way of life that stood in glaring contrast to the world. What gave the early Christians integrity was the fact that they could denounce the empire and in the same breath say, “And we have another way of living. If you are tired of what the empire has to offer, we invite you into the Way.” Even the pagan emperors could not ignore the little revolution of love. Emperor Julian confessed, “The godless Galileans feed our poor in addition to their own.” And the Way had little cells multiplying all over that ole empire. Of course, everyone was forewarned that in this kingdom everything is backward and upside-down — the last are first and the first are last, the poor are blessed and the mighty are cast from their thrones. And yet people were attracted to it. They were ready for something different from what the empire had to offer.

Coming out of college, my friends and I were pretty unwilling to “conform to the pattern of this world,” as the Scriptures say (Rom. 12:2). We knew all too well that there is a broad way that leads to death and that most people would take it, but we also knew that there is a narrow way that leads to life, and we wanted to find it (Matt. 7:13 – 14). In fact, people had begun to notice the ripples from our little student movement. I was asked to speak at Eastern’s graduation ceremony, and to the chagrin of the dean, I told the story of how
some friends and I were busted for rappelling out of the windows of one of the dorms. The dean had written us a warning that said, “Can you please enter and exit the buildings through the doors, like everybody else?” So my graduation message, “Crawl through the Window,” went something like this: The doors of normalcy and conformity are dead. The time has come to give up on the doors and find a window to climb through. It’s a little more dangerous and may get you into some trouble, but it is a heck of a lot more fun. And the people who have changed the world have always been the risk-takers who climb through windows while the rest of the world just walks in and out of doors. It got quite an ovation from everyone but the dean. We were ready for something new.

**AN EXPERIMENT IN TRUTH**

My friends and I had a hunch that there is more to life than what we had been told to pursue. We knew that the world cannot afford the American dream and that the good news is that there is another dream. We looked to the early church and to the Scriptures and to the poor to find it.

When Dorothy Day recalls the beginnings of the Catholic Worker movement, she says very unassumingly, “We were just there talking and it happened. We were just sitting there talking and people moved in. We were just sitting there talking and the lines began
to form....” The last line of her autobiography is, “It all happened while we sat there talking, and it is still going on.” I know what she meant.1

So about thirty of us from Eastern College continued dreaming together about another way of doing life. We stayed up night after night laughing and arguing, and eventually we came to a point where we knew we would never agree on exactly what causes homosexuality or whether Adam had a belly button (some things are best left unresolved), so we decided to go ahead and give our vision a shot. Besides, most of us were getting tired of talking and were ready to live. And I was living in a van (yes, down by the river), so we started looking for houses.

One of the first things we did was mail out letters to share stories and needs with the large cloud of supporters surrounding us. One of our first newsletters put it this way: “Once, there was a small group of kids who decided to go to a park in the middle of the city, and dance and play, laugh and twirl. As they played in the park, they thought that maybe another child would pass by and see them. Maybe that child would think it looked fun and even decide to join them. Then maybe another one would. Then maybe a businessman would hear them from his skyscraper. Maybe he would look out the

1. This is from her autobiography, The Long Loneliness. Dorothy Day’s writings have been a great inspiration to me, and especially in the early days of our community. One of my favorite compilations of her writings is Robert Ellsberg’s book Dorothy Day: Selected Writings (Orbis, 1992).
window. Maybe he would see them playing and lay down his papers and come down. Maybe they could teach him to dance. Then maybe another businessman would walk by, a nostalgic man, and he would take off his tie and toss aside his briefcase and dance and play. Maybe the whole city would join the dance. Maybe even the world. Maybe . . . Regardless, they decided to enjoy the dance.”

Poet Henry David Thoreau went to the woods because he wanted to live deliberately, to breathe deeply, and to suck out the marrow of life. We went to the ghetto. We narrowed our vision to this: love God, love people, and follow Jesus. And we began calling our little experiment the Simple Way. In January 1997, six of us moved into a little row house in Kensington, one of Pennsylvania’s poorest neighborhoods, just minutes from old St. Edward’s cathedral. It felt like we were reinventing the early church for the first time in two thousand years. (We were quite ignorant.)

We had no idea what we were getting into. We had no big vision for programs or community development. We wanted only to be passionate lovers of God and people and to take the gospel way of life seriously.

Some of us dropped out of school; some finished. Some of us were pursuing careers; others left them. People sometimes ask us what we do all day on an “average day” at the Simple Way, and my answer has always been real short — either “Nothing spectacular” or “What is an average day?” It gets a little crazy since
our lives are full of surprises and interruptions. I’ll do my best to describe it to you.

We hang out with kids and help them with homework in our living room, and jump in open fire hydrants on hot summer days. We share food with folks who need it, and eat the beans and rice our neighbor Ms. Sunshine makes for us. Folks drop in all day to say hi, have a safe place to cry, or get some water or a blanket. Sometimes we turn people away, or play Rock, Paper, Scissors to see who answers the door on tired days. We run a community store out of our house. We call it the Gathering, and neighbors can come in and fill a grocery bag with clothes for a dollar or find a couch, a bed, or a refrigerator. Sometimes people donate beautiful things for us to share with our neighbors; other times they donate their used toothbrushes.

We reclaim abandoned lots and make gardens amid the concrete wreckage around us. We plant flowers inside old TV screens and computer monitors on our roof. We see our friends waste away from drug addiction, and on a good day, someone is set free. We see police scare people, and on a good day, we find an officer who will play wiffleball with his billy club. We rehab abandoned houses. And we mourn the two people who died in this property (where I am now writing). We

2. I write one day a week from the inside of an abandoned house we have renovated. I can hear the kids outside finishing a mural on the side of the house that will read, “My people will beat their weapons into plows and study violence no more” (from the prophets Micah and Isaiah). The kids are breaking down toy weapons to make a mosaic plow for the mural.
try to make ugly things beautiful and to make murals. Instead of violence, we learn imagination and sharing. We share life with our neighbors and try to take care of each other. We hang out on the streets. We get fined for distributing food. We go to jail for sleeping under the stars. We win in court. We have friends in prison and on death row. We stand in the way of state-sanctioned execution and of the prison industrial complex.

We have always called ourselves a tax-exempt 501c3 antiprofit organization. We wrestle to free ourselves from macrocharity and distant acts of charity that serve to legitimize apathetic lifestyles of good intentions but rob us of the gift of community. We visit rich people and have them visit us. We preach, prophesy, and dream together about how to awaken the church from her violent slumber. Sometimes we speak to change the world; other times we speak to keep the world from changing us. We are about ending poverty, not simply managing it. We give people fish. We teach them to fish. We tear down the walls that have been built up around the fish pond. And we figure out who polluted it.

We fight terrorism — the terrorism within each of us, the terrorism of corporate greed, of American consumerism, of war. We are not pacifist hippies but passionate lovers who abhor passivity and violence. We spend our lives actively resisting everything that destroys life, whether that be terrorism or the war on
terrorism. We try to make the world safe, knowing that the world will never be safe as long as millions live in poverty so the few can live as they wish. We believe in another way of life — the kingdom of God — which stands in opposition to the principalities, powers, and rulers of this dark world (Eph. 6:12).³

So that’s an average day.

Since those early days, we’ve made plenty of mistakes and have never learned the secret to not hurting each other. We have begun asking new questions and have challenged each other to risk more. Some of the faces have changed, and some of us are still here. Now some of us are married, and some have chosen singleness, and some have kids.⁴ We recognize each of these choices as a gift. We have created some healthy structures and rhythms for our communal life, such as our Sabbath and our modified common pool of money, to which we each contribute $150 for living expenses each month. We have described the layers of our common life as an onion, at the core of which are the partners who covenant to love and cherish each other (the hardest and most beautiful thing we do), and each of us shares healthy responsibilities and expectations.

³. This whole average-day spiel was modified from various newsletters and periodicals from our early days, not the least of which appeared in the provocative Canadian Adbusters magazine (www.adbusters.org).

⁴. Mike and Michelle Brix, founding partners here at the Simple Way, traveled around the country in an RV for a year visiting different communities to catch glimpses of different styles of living in community with families and kids. They kept a log of their travels, which is on our website (www.thesimpleway.org).
We've hashed out our nonnegotiables and tried to understand those we do not agree with. We have created a statement of our faith so folks know we are not a cult. And so folks will know we are not just believers, we have created a statement of our practices, which range from simplicity and nonviolence to beauty and play.5

New folks have brought energy and imagination, and we've seen new visions born — from circuses and theater camps to superheroes6 and a new monasticism. Our programs revolve around the needs and gifts in our community and are always changing. They never define us, for we set out not to start programs but simply to be good neighbors. Neighbors have come and gone over the past decade. So sometimes we are feeding fifty folks out of our kitchen, helping a dozen kids with homework, fixing up abandoned houses, or planting urban gardens. In the summers, we run collaborative arts camps with the Yes! And . . . theater company,7 mixing suburban and urban kids and carving out space

5. Our statements of faith and practice and details about our community structure can be found on our website (www.thesimpleway.org).
6. In the event that you have not heard of the USAntitheroes, they are a group of intergalactic superheroes committed to creating a better universe and can be found at www.usanichterheroes.com — a project of the Worldwide Justice League.
7. Yes! And . . . (www.yesandcamp.org) is a community of artist-educators who are (1) working to reawaken a sense of playfulness, wonder, and imagination through collaborative arts education, (2) equipping children to reclaim their power as invested, active contributors in society, and (3) training educators to transform communities by recognizing, celebrating, and nurturing the diversity, creative nature, and voice within every person.
for imagination and dreams. The kids create dance, music, art, characters, a set, and build a show together. We now have so many partner communities and organizations that it really feels like a movement much bigger than the Simple Way. And we are just one little cell within the Body, very full of life but only a small part of the whole. Cells are born and cells die, but the Body lives forever.

**SHOUTING THE GOSPEL WITH OUR LIVES**

Remembering the invitation that Mother Teresa always gave to curious seekers, we have from the beginning invited people to “Come and see.” And people have, hundreds. As an evangelical, the only way I know to invite people into Christian faith is to come and see. After all, I’m not just trying to get someone to sign a doctrinal statement, but to come to know love, grace, and peace in the incarnation of Jesus, and now in the incarnation of the body, Christ’s church. So if

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8. One of our closest sister communities is Camdenhouse, across the river in New Jersey (www.camdenhouse.org). Two of the folks who started Camdenhouse are old friends of mine from the student ministry at Willow Creek, and others studied theology together in the rain forests in Belize. They do beautiful work reclaiming abandoned spaces and creating urban gardens on old waste sites. (Camden is an environmental disaster zone, with brown fields and toxic Superfund sites surrounding their inner-city neighborhood. Camden was rated the worst place to live in the US.) And they do a beautiful job teaching us all new ideas for sustainable living, as well as articulating the theology and philosophy underlying their work. In addition to a pottery studio and a bee hatchery, they have now built a giant urban greenhouse and natural-bread oven on what used to be forsaken spaces, what we call “practicing resurrection.” They have different jobs, include married and single folks, and are closely connected with the Catholic parish of Sacred Heart (across the street from their house), and several folks teach in the school.
someone asked me to introduce them to Jesus, I would say, “Come and see. Let me show you Jesus with skin on.” Sometimes we have evangelicals (usually from the suburbs) who pretentiously ask how we “evangelize people.” I usually tell them that we bring folks like them here to learn the kingdom of God from the poor, and then send them out to tell the rich and powerful there is another way of life being born in the margins. For Jesus did not seek out the rich and powerful in order to trickle down his kingdom. Rather, he joined those at the bottom, the outcasts and undesirables, and everyone was attracted to his love for people on the margins. (We know that we all are poor and lonely anyway, don’t we?) Then he invited everyone into a journey of downward mobility to become the least. As the old Franciscan slogan goes, “Preach the gospel always. And when necessary, use words.” Or as our seventy-year-old revolutionary Catholic nun, Sister Margaret, puts it, “We are trying to shout the gospel with our lives.” Many spiritual seekers have not been able to hear the words of Christians because the lives of Christians have been making so much horrible noise. It can be hard to hear the gentle whisper of the Spirit amid the noise of Christendom.

A VOICE FOR THE VOICELESS? NOT US

Not too long ago, those of us at the Simple Way were about to speak before a congregation. The person
doing the introduction said, “These folks are a voice for the voiceless.” And something inside me hurt. I gently corrected them. Everyone has a voice. I know many amazing people have used the old “voice for the voiceless” line (Oscar Romero, Mother Teresa, even the book of Proverbs). But it just felt strange. Perhaps we are too quick to assume folks cannot speak for themselves.

We are not a voice for the voiceless. The truth is that there is a lot of noise out there drowning out quiet voices, and many people have stopped listening to the cries of their neighbors. Lots of folks have put their hands over their ears to drown out the suffering. Institutions have distanced themselves from the disturbing cries. When Paul writes in Romans 8 that the entire creation is groaning for its liberation, he goes on to say that “we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly” (v. 23). This is the chorus of the generations of seemingly voiceless people that we have joined. And God has a special ear for their groaning, regardless of who else is listening.

It is a beautiful thing when folks in poverty are no longer just a missions project but become genuine friends and family with whom we laugh, cry, dream, and struggle. One of the verses I have grown to love is the one where Jesus is preparing to leave the disciples and says, “I no longer call you servants…. Instead, I have called you friends” (John 15:15). Servanthood is a fine place to begin, but gradually we move toward
mutual love, genuine relationships. Someday, perhaps we can even say those words that Ruth said to Naomi after years of partnership: “Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried” (Ruth 1:16 – 17).

And that’s when things get messy. When people begin moving beyond charity and toward justice and solidarity with the poor and oppressed, as Jesus did, they get in trouble. Once we are actually friends with folks in struggle, we start to ask why people are poor, which is never as popular as giving to charity. One of my friends has a shirt marked with the words of late Catholic bishop Dom Helder Camara: “When I fed the hungry, they called me a saint. When I asked why people are hungry, they called me a communist.” Charity wins awards and applause, but joining the poor gets you killed. People do not get crucified for charity. People are crucified for living out a love that disrupts the social order, that calls forth a new world. People are not crucified for helping poor people. People are crucified for joining them.

**ORDINARY RADICALS**

Sometimes people call those of us in our community radical. As I said before, if by radical we mean “root,” I think it is precisely the right word for what we are trying to do — get down to the roots of what
it means to be Christian disciples. Most of the time, though, I think that if what we are doing seems radical, then that says more about the apathy of Western Christianity than about the true nature of our discipleship. And this is why “radical” has to be coupled with “ordinary.” Our way of life was typical in the days of the early Jesus movement. We are like the Marys and Marthas, and Peter’s family — houses of hospitality, which was the standard call of the early Christians, who abandoned their personal possessions to a new family. This is to say nothing of the countless others who gave up everything and left their homes with no money or food or even sandals to follow Jesus. Christendom seems very unprepared for people who take the gospel that seriously.

One of the things that has fascinated me about the days of the early church is how those who abandoned homes and possessions to follow Jesus lived in such union with those who opened their homes to them and the poor. Gerd Theissen calls the two groups the “wandering charismatics” and the “local sympathizers.” The wanderers were traveling apostles and relied on the support of the sympathizers. Both shaped the early church. They did not look down on each other. The sympathizers did not write the wanderers off as radicals or freaks, and the wanderers did not judge...

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the sympathizers as sellouts. They loved and supported one another. From our earliest days, we have seen the importance of that partnership as we have commissioned wanderers and nomads who travel like the apostles did, or like the later circuit riders of the church (who traveled on horseback, which is a little harder nowadays). These new pilgrims help to cross-pollinate our communities and lives. We have had folks travel the country by bike, by car, on foot, using biodiesel, and by RV, seeking to intersect our lives in the Christian underground. I finished this chapter traveling on a bus that has a converted diesel engine that runs on used vegetable oil. (We’d just hit up restaurants for their old oil, and busted out a little circus [www.runawaycircus.org] to earn our dinner). Some folks, like our sister community, Psalters, live permanently nomadic lives. Last month, with the full support of Sacred Heart parish in Camden, we just commissioned another brother to travel across the US by bike, spreading the news of what’s happening in Camden and Philly and bringing back the stories of the people he meets. He went out with nothing but faith and his

10. The veggie bus ran almost entirely on used oil we picked up at restaurants. Friends across the country are pioneering this movement, converting vehicles and even holding grease festivals to educate folks on renewable energy. Joshua Tickel’s book is a good resource: *From the Fryer to the Fuel Tank: The Complete Guide to Using Vegetable Oil as an Alternative Fuel*. A growing number of people of faith and conscience are imagining new ways of living that will create a safer, more sustainable world. (It will be a long time before we have wars over used vegetable oil . . .) This is just one example.

bike, dependent on God’s providence and the church’s hospitality.

**DESPEC TACULARIZING THINGS**

Again, it’s easy to see these things as spectacular, but I really believe that’s only because we live in a world that has lost its imagination. These things were normal in the early church. It’s just what conversion looked like. We must be careful not to allow ourselves to be written off as radicals when church history and the contemporary Christian landscape are filled with ordinary radicals. But today people crave the spectacular. People are drawn to lights and celebrities, to arenas and megachurches. In the desert, Jesus was tempted by the spectacular — to throw himself from the temple so that people might believe — to shock and awe people, if you will. Today the church is tempted by the spectacular, to do big, miraculous things so people might believe, but Jesus has called us to littleness and compares our revolution to the little mustard seed, to yeast making its way through dough, slowly infecting this dark world with love. Many of us who find ourselves living differently from the dominant culture end up needing to “despectacularize” things a little so that the simple way is made as accessible as possible to other ordinary radicals.

Sometimes people call folks here at the Simple Way saints. Usually they either want to applaud our
lives and live vicariously through us, or they want to
write us off as superhuman and create a safe distance.
One of my favorite quotes, written on my wall here in
bold black marker, is from Dorothy Day: “Don’t call us
saints; we don’t want to be dismissed that easily.”

The truth is that when people look at us like we are
sacrificial servants, I have to laugh. We’ve just fallen
in love with God and our neighbors, and that is trans-
forming our lives. Besides, I think if most other folks
knew Adrienne and the kids, a beautiful family that
has been living with us after coming out of the shel-
ter system, they’d do the same things we are doing.
It just makes sense not to have families on the street
or in abandoned houses, especially when we have
a spare bedroom. Honestly, the way of life we have
chosen often seems more natural than the alternative.
The alternative — moving out and living in the sub-
urbs — seems terribly sacrificial (or painfully empty).
What must it be like not to have block parties or not to
actually know the people around us? There are times
when I have been very frustrated with wealthy folks
for hoarding their stuff. But now I know enough rich
folks to know the loneliness that is all too familiar to
many of them. I read a study comparing the health of
a society with its economics, and one of the things it
revealed is that wealthy countries like ours have the
highest rates of depression, suicide, and loneliness. We
are the richest and most miserable people in the world.
I feel sorry that so many of us have settled for a lonely world of independence and riches when we could all experience the fullness of life in community and interdependence. Why would I want a fancy car when I can ride a bike, or a TV when I can play outside with sidewalk chalk? Okay, sometimes I still want the hot tub on the roof, but the rest I can live without. And I mean live without. Patting Mother Teresa on the back, someone said to her, “I wouldn’t do what you do for a million dollars.” She said with a grin, “Me neither.” I almost feel selfish sometimes, for the gift of community. The beautiful thing is that there is enough to go around.

Once we get past the rebellious or reactive countercultural paradigm and muster up the courage to try living in new ways, most of us find that community is very natural and makes a lot of sense, and that it is not as foreign to most of the world’s population as it is to us. Community is what we are created for. We are made in the image of a God who is community, a plurality of oneness. When the first human was made, things were not good until there were two, helping one another. The biblical story is the story of community, from beginning to end. Jesus lived and modeled community with his little band of disciples. He always sent them out in pairs, and the early church is the story of a people who were together and were of one heart and mind, sharing all in common. The story ends with a vision of the new community in the book of Revelation,
where the city of God is dressed beautifully for her lover, this community called the New Jerusalem, where heaven visits earth and people are fully reconciled to God and each other, the lion lays down with the lamb, mourning turns to dancing, and the garden takes over the concrete world!

But that doesn’t mean community is easy. For everything in this world tries to pull us away from community, pushes us to choose ourselves over others, to choose independence over interdependence, to choose great things over small things, to choose going fast alone over going far together. The simple way is not the easy way. No one ever promised us that community or Christian discipleship would be easy. There’s a commonly mistranslated verse where Jesus tells the disciples, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me…. For my yoke is good and my burden is light.” People take that to mean that if we come to Jesus, everything will be easy. (The word *good* is often mistranslated as “easy”). Ha, that’s funny. My life was pretty easy before I met Jesus. In one sense, the load is lighter because we carry the burdens of the world together. But he is still telling us to pick up a yoke. Yoke had a lot of different meanings. It was the tool used for harnessing animals for farming. It was the word used for taking on a rabbi’s teaching (as Jesus seems to use it here). Yoke was also the word used
for the brutal weight of slavery and oppression that the prophets call us to break (Isaiah 58, among other passages). One of the things I think Jesus is doing is setting us free from the heavy yoke of an oppressive way of life. I know plenty of people, both rich and poor, who are suffocating from the weight of the American dream, who find themselves heavily burdened by the lifeless toil and consumption we put upon ourselves. This is the yoke we are being set free from. The new yoke is still not easy (it’s a cross, for heaven’s sake), but we carry it together, and it is good and leads us to rest, especially for the weariest traveler.

In fact, if our lives are easy, we must be doing something wrong. Momma T also used to say, “Following Jesus is simple, but not easy. Love until it hurts, and then love more.” My friend Brooke, with whom I went to India and later started the Simple Way, used to have the words “Simple but not easy” painted on her wall. And at one point, when things were particularly difficult, I graffitied over them, changing it to “Simple and hard as crud.” Dorothy Day of the Catholic worker movement understood this well. She said, “Love is a harsh and dreadful thing to ask of us, but it is the only answer.”12 This love is not sentimental but heart-wrenching, the most difficult and the most beautiful thing in the world.

We’ve been very careful at the Simple Way never to claim that we have the corner on the market for “radical Christianity.” Nor have we even tried to spread a brand or model. And the incredible thing is that the stories of ordinary radicals are all over the place, stories of everyday people doing small things with great love, with their lives, gifts, and careers. I heard about a group of massage therapists who spend their days washing and massaging the tired feet of homeless folks. Some manicurists told me they go to old folks homes and ask which old ladies have no visitors or family, and then they sit with them, laugh, tell stories, and do their nails. On some of our marches for peace and justice, chiropractors join us in the evenings to take care of people’s tired bodies so that we will be ready for another day of marching. Around the corner from us, our close friends at the House of Grace Catholic Worker run a free clinic where nurses, doctors, chiropractors, and dentists care for folks who do not have health care. There are lawyers who bail us out of jail, advocate for human rights, and go with us before zoning boards that have no categories for understanding how we live.13 The examples are as numerous as

13. We have gone before courts and zoning boards for violating all sorts of codes. We have been told we cannot invite people into our home to eat, because the Simple Way does not have a food distribution license. We have been told that we are breaking a “brothel code,” which makes it illegal for unrelated people to live together. Funny, one of my favorite moments was when we went before zoning and the inspector’s name was Jesus (not an uncommon Latino name), and our Jewish lawyer said, “Once again, Jesus is causing us all kinds of trouble.” Lovely.
the number of vocations. But the calling is the same: to love God and our neighbors with our whole lives, careers, and gifts.

In the early days of our community, it was as if we had a “radical disciple” mold, and everyone had to fit into it. But as we have matured (Matured? Maybe aged in wisdom . . .), we have seen the beauty of diverse vocations and the multidimensionality of Christian discipleship. One of the best things communities like ours do is carve out a space for people to discern and redefine their vocations. Vocation comes from the same root as voice, denoting the hearing of a divine call. Beyond knowing that God has a purpose for our lives, most of us (especially non-Catholics) spend little energy seeking our vocation, especially in light of how the needs and sufferings of our neighbors might inform how we use our gifts for divine purposes. There are plenty of people who are miserable in their jobs, for they have not listened to God’s call. And I would add there are many Christians who are not fulfilled in their spiritual lives because they have no sense of their gifts or purpose, and they just run to the mission field to save souls rather than transform lives and communities using their gifts and those of the people they live among. Both lead to emptiness and burnout.

The concept of multidimensional discipleship is essential as we consider how to retain a radical discipleship that is multiethnic, intergenerational, and
includes singles and families. Otherwise we will just end up surrounded by people who look like us, think like us, and respond to the gospel in exactly the same way we do. And that would rob us of the gift of community and of what it means to be a body with many different parts. What an extraordinary thing it must have been to sit around a table with that eclectic mix of Zealot revolutionaries, Roman tax collectors, peasants, Samaritans, prostitutes, and fishermen, all conspiring to find a radical new way of life.

In the early church, whenever converts sought baptism, their entire careers were reimagined. Just as baptism was a symbol of people's dying to their old lives and rising to new ones, so there was the very real sense that the old ways of living were gone and something new was here. For some, like the tax collector Zacchaeus, whom Jesus calls down from the sycamore tree where he had climbed up to see Jesus from a safe distance, the face-to-face encounter meant that his career was radically redefined — socially, economically, politically. He does not sell everything, but he sells half of everything, and then pays people back four times what he owed them, enacting the ancient Levitical teaching of Jubilee where debts are forgiven and possessions are redistributed. (We need some Jubilee tax collectors!) Zacchaeus was still a tax collector (though he may have gone broke eventually), but now he was a different kind of tax collector. For others, the
encounter with Jesus meant that they needed to leave their jobs, like another tax collector named Levi (Matthew). He meets Jesus and leaves it all behind, inviting his tax collector friends to join the movement.

Some may leave their jobs. Others will redefine them. When we truly encounter Jesus and the poor, we may still be a tax collector, but we will be a different kind of tax collector. We may still be a doctor, but we will be a different kind of doctor. Hippolytus (ca. AD 218) said it like this in the third century: “The professions and trades of those who are going to be accepted into the community must be examined. The nature and type of each must be established . . . brothel, sculptors of idols, charioteer, athlete, gladiator . . . give it up or be rejected. A military constable must be forbidden to kill, neither may he swear; if he is not willing to follow these instructions, he must be rejected. A proconsul or magistrate who wears the purple and governs by the sword shall give it up or be rejected. Anyone taking or already baptized who wants to become a soldier shall be sent away, for he has despised God.” 14 Many of us feel an inner collision between the old life and the new one. One executive told me he sold his entire company and didn’t even keep any of the money, because it had only made him miserable. Another executive told me he was trying to

implement a sliding-scale wage (based on family size) that valued everyone equally, so the CEO was not making more money than the janitor or receptionist. One friend in the military left because of his reborn identity and is now painting murals and preaching nonviolence with us here in Philly.

It's sort of like if you work for a porn shop and have a conversion experience. Most of us would probably agree it's a good idea to rethink your career track. But why wouldn't we do that for other born-again disciples? What if someone works for Lockheed Martin (the world's largest weapons contractor) or a notorious human rights abuser like Coca-Cola or Nestle or Disney or Gap? We have had many people — professionals,

15. The United Nations reported in 1992 that income disparities between the world's richest and poorest have doubled since 1960. Today, the wealthiest 20 percent of the world's population receives almost 83 percent of the world's income, while the poorest 20 percent receives less than 2 percent! In 1965, the average US worker made $7.52 per hour, while the person running the company made $330.38 per hour; today, the average worker makes $7.39 per hour, the average CEO $1,566.68 per hour — 212 times more! (Ched Myers, “God Speed the Year of Jubilee!” Sojourners, May – June 1998).

16. Coca-Cola has been accused of arming its factories in Columbia with paramilitary thugs. Nestle has been accused of mass-marketing an infant formula as a breast-milk substitute to third-world women. Disney has been accused of maintaining sweatshops in Haiti and Bangladesh, and Gap has been accused of having similar factories in Cambodia and China. These are a few of the companies who continually appear as human rights violators documented by corporate watch groups across the globe. Some, like Gap, have made significant improvements, but usually only after public outcry brought attention to their abuses and they lost lawsuits, like the Saipan case in 2004. A few of my favorite groups working for corporate accountability and who suggest healthy alternatives are:

- Globalexchange.org
- Sweatshopwatch.org
- Corpwatch.org
- Hrw.org (Human Rights Watch)
- Iccr.org (Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility)
parents, economists, nurses, military officers—come through our community and begin asking fresh questions about their vocation, what the voice of the Spirit is calling them to do with their lives.

Not everyone responds exactly the same way. Some will give up their houses and leave their fields. Others will offer their possessions to the community and form hospitality houses like Mary and Martha, and Peter’s family. Others will hold back from the common pool and lie to God, and they will be struck dead like Ananias and Sapphira. (Just kidding, hopefully . . .) There are the Matthews who encounter Jesus and sell everything. But then there are also the Zacchaeuses who meet Jesus and redefine their careers. So not everyone responds in the same way, but we must respond. We must seek our vocation listening to the voice of God and the voices of our suffering neighbors. Both Zacchaeus and Matthew responded to the call of Jesus in radical ways that did not conform to the pattern of the world.

Here in Philly, I have a friend named Atom. He’s a scientist who uses big words and usually needs a translator, and he started working on his PhD when he was twenty-one. Then he started hanging out with folks here at the Simple Way and reading the Bible. His initial reaction was to leave everything, be a bike messenger, and pray all night. (His mom recently introduced me as one of the people who messed up her son.) But
the more he sought God and his gifts, the more he felt his own vocation emerging. As he studied science in the context of his global neighborhood, he saw that lack of access to clean water was the biggest killer of children in our world—over twenty thousand die each day from curable water-borne diseases. Economists predict that within the next decade, the leading cause of violence and war will be not oil but water. So Atom has dedicated much of his life to studying and working with indigenous communities to solve this solvable crisis, and all hubbed out of a simple life on our block in inner-city Philly.¹⁷

A while later, Atom’s sister Rachel joined us at the Simple Way. She had gone to one of the leading culinary schools in the country and worked at a fancy restaurant downtown. (She once sneaked Atom and me into a $100 a plate dinner where we fit right in . . . stuffing our pockets full of foods I cannot pronounce the name of.) As she read the Scriptures and hung out with friends in poverty, her gifts began to come to life. She made cookies with kids on the block and made fancy dinners with folks on the street. (It’s not every day our homeless friends get lobster.) Both Atom and Rachel are ordinary radicals continuing to discern their vocations and spend their lives for others.

¹⁷. The water team is a collaboration of Circle of Hope (www.circleofhope.net/venture) and the Mennonite Central Committee.
MISSIONARIES TO THE CHURCH

We have never really considered ourselves missionaries to the poor. Jesus was not simply a missionary to the poor. He was poor—born a baby refugee from the badlands of Nazareth, wandered the world a homeless rabbi, died the rotten death of insurrectionists and bandits on the cross, executed by an oppressive empire, buried in a borrowed tomb. Jesus was crucified not for helping poor people but for joining them. That is the Jesus we follow.

A pastor who has been a longtime supporter and friend of the Simple Way (and father to one of the founders!) said, “I used to think you all were missionaries bringing the gospel to your neighborhood, but now I see that it is in your neighborhood that you have learned the gospel, and that you are actually missionaries to the church.”

Many of us are disenchanted Catholics, and others are recovering evangelicals. When people used to ask me if we were Protestant or Catholic, I was so discouraged with both that I would just answer, “No. We are just followers of Jesus.” Now, as I thirst for God’s church to be alive and one, when people ask me if I am Protestant or Catholic, I just answer, “Yes.” And when people ask me if we are evangelicals, I usually define it as I did in the introduction to this book and say, “Absolutely, we want to spread the kingdom of God like crazy.”

We have never considered ourselves a “church
plant.” There are congregations on nearly every corner. I’m not sure we need more churches. What we really need is a church. I say one church is better than fifty. I have tried to remove the plural form churches from my vocabulary, training myself to think of the church as Christ did, and as the early Christians did. The metaphors for her are always singular — a body, a bride. I heard one gospel preacher say it like this, as he really wound up and broke a sweat: “We’ve got to unite ourselves as one body. Because Jesus is coming back, and he’s coming back for a bride, not a harem.” So we worship in our neighborhood. A few of us attend the Lutheran congregation, some Iglesia del Barrio (Church of the Neighborhood, which meets in an old, resurrected Methodist building). Many of us are covenanted at a Brethren in Christ cell church called Circle of Hope, where we have renovated a 7,500 square foot abandoned warehouse and gather for worship on Sunday evenings (which we just call PMs, for “public meetings,” just one small glimpse of what church really is). Others are Catholic and go to Mass, and still others are not Catholic and go to Mass. We have done our homework club out of the Presbyterian building and have run an Episcopal after-school program. The Lutheran congregation put in showers so we can host larger overnight groups there. Some of us work at the Free Clinic run by the Catholic Workers, and others with a

18. www.circleofhope.net
partner community committed to addiction recovery called New Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{19} And on and on.

It feels like a body, a big family. Every few months, we gather for Nights of Celebration, or Love Feasts, when we eat some good grub, share stories and songs, and celebrate what God is doing among us. And once a year, we host our Family Reunion, which is an incredible gathering of activist theologians, new monastics, students, old friends, wanderers, revolutionaries, and regular ole Christians (if there is such a thing). It is a beautiful organic web of cells within the body. We continually lift one another in prayer, as Jesus prayed, asking that we would be one—one with the faithful disciples of the established church, one with faithful disciples of the underground church, one with the ancient church of our past, one church. What the world really needs is not more churches but a Church.

\textbf{A CULT-URE OF SORTS}

Any time we make a radical conversion, there is the danger that people will say we are being brainwashed or are joining a cult. The truth is everyone in our culture has been deeply polluted by the noise and garbage of this world, and we all need to be washed clean. We need minds that are renewed and uncluttered so they are free to dream again. And let us not forget that the word \textit{cult} comes from the same root from which we

\textsuperscript{19} \url{www.libertynet.org/njl}. 
get our word *culture*. So while we are not waiting for a UFO landing, preparing for a mass suicide, or stockpiling weapons, we are forming an alternative culture. It is not simply a counterculture reacting to the dominant culture. (And getting marketed by it. It won’t be long before you’ll be able to buy gas masks for anti-war protests that are made by Lockheed Martin, or T-shirts that say “Make poverty history” made by kids in sweatshops.) We are forming a new culture. And in many ways, it is broader and more sustainable, much less “tribal” than nationalism and much less dangerous than the cult of civil religion that is infecting the church. And the imperial cult seems to be suspiciously closer to those infamous cults that stockpile weapons and await their suicidal fate while pretentiously fortifying themselves against any truth that would set them free from the illusions that are killing them — those cults who continue to offer blood sacrifices to the gods of Mammon and Violence on the altars of desert sand and jungle soil.

As a community, we have a doctrinal statement so folks know we are not drinking lamb’s blood and sacrificing animals (except for that one stray cat that kept coming in . . . just kidding). Most Christian congregations and communities have such a statement of faith articulating their orthodoxy (meaning “right belief”), but that’s usually where it ends. For us, belief is only the beginning. What really matters is how we live, how
what we believe gets fleshed out, so we also have a statement of orthopraxis (meaning “right living, right practices”). And this is where most belief-oriented faith communities fall short. They tell us only what they believe, but they do not tell us how their beliefs affect their lifestyles.

In creating a new culture, we are now a part of what we’ve come to call a community of communities, a web of relationships between grassroots organizations, intentional communities, and hospitality houses across the country. Many of them are older (and most are wiser) than us, and some are just being born. Nearly everywhere I speak, small groups of young people come forward with fire in their eyes and say, “We have been dreaming the same dreams.” A part of what we try to do is make the gospel way of life as accessible as possible.

One of the ways we have begun to understand what is happening is through the lens of the ancient Christian monastic movements. During eras of history when the identity of Christian disciples became all but lost, the Spirit has always led small groups of people into exodus, into the wilderness, the desert, or the abandoned places within the empire. Our friends at a sister community called Rutba House in North Carolina organized a gathering devoted to creating a monastic rule of sorts, articulating the many common threads of belief and practice that we see in the contemporary
movement of the Spirit. It is not so much fleeing from something as dancing toward something new, “building a new society in the shell of the old,” as the Catholic Workers say — creating a culture in which it is easier for people to be good.

**SCHOOLS FOR CONVERSION**

It’s a shame that a few conservative evangelicals have had a monopoly on the word *conversion*. Some of us shiver at the word. But conversion means to change, to alter, after which something looks different than it did before — like conversion vans or converted currency. We need converts in the best sense of the word, people who are marked by the renewing of their minds and imaginations, who no longer conform to the pattern that is destroying our world. Otherwise, we have only believers, and believers are a dime-a-dozen nowadays. What the world needs is people who believe so much in another world that they cannot help but begin enacting it now.

Then we will start to see some true conversion vans — vehicles that run on veggie oil instead of diesel. Then we will see some converted homes — fueled by renewable energy — and laundry machines powered by stationary bicycles and toilets flushed with dirty sink water. Then we will see tears converted to laughter.

20. The fruit of this conversation can be found in our collaborative book *Schools for Conversion: Twelve Marks of a New Monasticism* and on the website www.newmonasticism.org. I have included a summary of these marks in appendix 1.
as people beat their swords into plowshares and weld their machine guns into saxophones, and as police officers use their billy clubs to play baseball.

For even if the whole world believed in resurrection, little would change until we began to practice it. We can believe in CPR, but people will remain dead until someone breathes new life into them. And we can tell the world that there is life after death, but the world really seems to be wondering if there is life before death.

There is the kind of conversion that happens to people not because of how we talk but because of how we live. And our little experiments in truth become the schools for conversion, where folks can learn what it means for the old life to be gone and the new life to be upon us, no longer taking the broad path that leads to destruction. Conversion is not an event but a process, a process of slowly tearing ourselves from the clutches of the culture.

**NOT JUST GOOD SAMARITANS**

As we practice hospitality, there comes a point where the suffering around us drives us to ask what it would take to reimagine the world. We’ve all heard the saying, “Give someone a fish and they’ll eat for a day, but teach them to fish and they’ll eat for the rest of their life.” But our friend John Perkins challenges us to go farther. He says, “The problem is that nobody is asking who owns the pond.” As we consider economics, some
of us will give people fish. Others will teach people to fish. But still others must be looking at who owns the pond and who polluted it, for these are also essential questions for our survival. We must storm the fence that has been built around the pond and make sure everyone can get to it, for there are enough fish for all of us.

A homeless mother once told us that there is a big difference between managing poverty and ending poverty. “Managing poverty is big business. Ending poverty is revolutionary.” Too often, the church has chaplained the corporate global economy, caring for the victims of the systems. As long as we uncritically manage the collateral damage of the market economy, the world can continue to produce victims. But as Dietrich Bonhoeffer said during his age of injustice, “We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, but we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself.” It’s like in community when the toilet floods, which happens when you have a dozen people sharing one toilet. When it starts to pour out water, you don’t just start cleaning up the mess. You also have to shut off the water that is causing the flood.

That’s the sort of thing that requires working together and the humility of admitting that we can do together what we cannot do alone. When we did so poorly at helping folks recover from drug addiction, we
stepped back and said, “Duh, no wonder. None of us are heroine addicts.” So we have surrounded ourselves with friends who have so much to teach us. Alone we see only in part, but together, as the Bible says, “love is made complete among us” (1 John 4:17). One of our sister communities here in Philly is New Jerusalem, which is made up of people recovering from addictions to drugs and alcohol. They have taught us so much about drug addiction, as well as our own addictions and recovery. They have taught us that we cannot look at the sick without looking at what is causing the sickness, that sin is both personal and social. (They teach about “the politics of drugs” and the complexity of the drug industry.) People are poor not just because of their sins; they are poor because of our sins (and people are rich because of our sins). On the wall of New Jerusalem is a sign that reads, “We cannot fully recover until we help the society that made us sick recover.”

When you see so many of your friends waste away in drug addiction, you start to ask where the drugs are coming from, and it’s not just from kids on the corner. When we are staring in the face of the largest prison buildup in the history of civilization, with two million citizens in prison, and one in every three black men under judicial constraint, we start to wonder what good the Thirteenth Amendment is if slavery is illegal unless a person is convicted of a crime. When we are trying to
teach kids not to hit each other and they see a government use violence to bring about change, we start to consider what it means to give witness to a peace that is not like the world gives (John 14:27). When we live in the wreckage of an old industrial neighborhood that has lost over two hundred thousand jobs and now has seven hundred abandoned factories, we start to ask questions about the corporate global economy, especially when we see the same companies abuse other “neighbors” overseas. Dr. Martin Luther King put it like this: “We are called to play the Good Samaritan on life’s roadside … but one day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that a system that produces beggars needs to be repaved. We are called to be the Good Samaritan, but after you lift so many people out of the ditch you start to ask, maybe the whole road to Jericho needs to be repaved.”