

COMPASSION: VANGUARD OF THE GOSPEL

BY JESSE C. MIDDENDORF

I WILL NEVER FORGET THE OPEN SEWERS, the homes that literally leaned one upon the other as they spread up the steep hillside for thousands of feet. Animals wandered around under the stilted homes, and children were everywhere, some only partially clothed. In the middle of it all, adjacent to the tightly packed homes, was one freshly painted structure with a neat sign on the front. Inside, a dozen computer screens glowed alongside keyboards and printers. And at the keyboards sat a group of young adults and teenagers working with intense determination.

This bright spot is a computer school operated by the Church of the Nazarene as a compassionate ministry. It is designed to help lift young people in this depressed community out of the cycle of despair, drug addiction, and hopelessness that ensnares so many of their peers.

And the head of the program? She is a former drug addict herself, a dramatic testimony to the transforming grace of God and the compassionate evangelism of a local church committed to making a difference for teenagers trapped by squalor and dead-end circumstances.

The program has now attracted another young adult leader, who moved with his family into the community to live side by side with its residents. Supported by donations from people who believe in this ministry, he works full-time as a teacher/coach to help the young people complete high school and develop their skills through the computer center. He then helps them apply to the rapidly growing number of companies that need computer operators and graphic designers. Many of the young people are now active in the community's new church,

which was built on the labors of committed volunteers from the mother church who dared believe God could use electronics to open hearts and minds.

Evangelism at the keyboard! It is one of many variations of compassionate ministry offered across the globe by the Church of the Nazarene. Hot meal programs for children, food distribution centers for distressed communities, food and shelter centers for the homeless, after-school tutoring, child sponsorship ministries—the list could go on for pages.

Such ministries all have this in common: Jesus said we should do it! Compassionate ministry is at the very heart of gospel living. It fulfills the words of Jesus, who said in Matthew 25:40 that when we have done such things as these to “the least,” we have done them to Him.

From its very beginning, the Church of the Nazarene was characterized by ministry to the poor and the disadvantaged. Our roots in Los Angeles lie in the inner city. Our work in India has been deeply embedded in medical missions. Our early Texas people were intensely engaged in providing alternatives for unwed mothers who often were abandoned and left destitute.

And it is still true of Nazarenes. Compassion is not a program—it is our lifestyle. It is at the heart of our evangelistic zeal to bring Christ's love close to the heart of everyone. It is a recognition that the ache of a hungry heart is drowned out by the growl of an empty stomach. It is the awareness that people in distress need aid before they need a sermon. It is a simple response to the profound need of a world for which we all care deeply. It is the Christian, Holiness, missional thing to do. ♦



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Jesse C. Middendorf
is a general
superintendent
in the Church
of the Nazarene.