

# P E N T E C O S T A L evangel

## City on a Hill

**'You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden.'**

— Matthew 5:14, NIV

By Scott Harrup in Milwaukee

March 20, 2011

Deb Pokel is having a bad day. With only \$60 to her name and two young boys in tow, she has been trying to navigate the streets of Milwaukee as a homeless mom. In early November, the city on Lake Michigan's western shore is already frigid on many nights, and she was fortunate to find temporary shelter.

Then she made the mistake of allowing a son to take a spin on some nearby park equipment. He broke his arm. A trip to a walk-in clinic will claim every cent she has.

As the hopelessness of her predicament sinks in, she begins to cry. The tears are very real; fortunately for Deb, the scenario is entirely simulated.

Welcome to Passport to Compassion.

The poverty simulation experience, organized by the ministry team at City on a Hill in Milwaukee, draws participants as diverse as real-life mom Deb and a team of Wal-Mart executives. The idea behind the two-hour exercise is simple: to put yourself in the place of Milwaukee's sizeable impoverished community (the U.S. Census Bureau pegged Milwaukee as the fourth-poorest city in the nation in 2009), many of whom are homeless.

Deb completed an orientation seminar and received play money with simple instructions to make the cash last throughout the "day" for her kids as they moved through City on a Hill's ministry center to different displays. One room is a general store. Another displays different temporary housing options. The medical room includes a stack of cards with random crises to overcome. Deb drew the broken-arm card.

"This morning, my kids were fighting over the last little bit of cereal," Deb tells me as she regains her composure. "They were a little upset we didn't have the right kind or not enough of a certain kind. Now we're standing here, and I'm in tears because I'm realizing that this is an exercise for us. But for many people ... ?"

### **A heart for the poor**

This is exactly the kind of personal discovery City on a Hill Executive Director Diane De La Santos hopes to elicit. And she wants to see that discovery shared in more venues than just the former hospital complex in which City on a Hill operates.

A licensed minister with the Assemblies of God Wisconsin-Northern Michigan District, Diane travels within the two states helping churches organize Compassion Sunday services. She preaches on God's heart for the poor and the obligation of Christ's followers to meet the needs of those living in poverty and oppression. She and her staff have helped churches replicate Passport to Compassion.

When City on a Hill took Passport to Compassion to Parklawn Assembly of God in Milwaukee in an early foray, team members wondered what the response would be. Many families at Parklawn (Walter Harvey, senior pastor) had come through hard times themselves.

"It impacted them powerfully," Diane remembers. "They saw how blessed they were and how much they could do for the poor in their own city."

Pastor Harvey invited Assemblies of God U.S. Missions Executive Director Zollie Smith to speak at the church the following Sunday. Diane gave a brief summary of the Passport event after Smith's message. The congregation collected \$22,000 for City on a Hill that day. A few days later, a young woman from the church came by the ministry with a \$3,000 check.

Churches that co-sponsor a Passport event or visit City on a Hill to participate in its ministries find that their members take ownership of the concepts they learn and successfully transplant them.

Ken and Tammy Davis volunteered with Passport and took the program back to Burlington AG (Howard Edwards, senior pastor) in Burlington, Wis.

"We organized Family Free Day with everything free — haircuts, rummage items, bike repair, auto safety checks, groceries, lunch," Ken says. "We went out into the community with fliers and did prayer walks. We didn't know what to expect. Nearly 300 people came."

"We want to wake up American Christians to God's heart for the poor and His expectation that His people engage in ministry," Diane says. "City on a Hill becomes a place where churches can safely and easily pursue this mission."

### **Touching a community**

Before City on a Hill opened its doors, crime, drugs and prostitution were daily obstacles for nearby residents. Much has changed in the decade since the ministry has made its home at 2224 W. Kilbourn Ave., the former Good Samaritan Medical Center. Local law enforcement acknowledges the work of Diane's team as a factor in lowered crime and the community's transformation.

Changes began in August 2000. A coalition of Assemblies of God ministries led by AG ministers Brian Schmid and Laurie Ganiere worked with other local churches to invite Convoy of Hope to Milwaukee for a day of community outreach. Some 8,000 guests attended the Convoy event held on the parking lot of the vacant hospital. Among them were representatives of Aurora Health Care, the hospital's owner.

As guests filled the parking lot, the Aurora team saw how effectively the outreach connected with residents. They soon approached the AG Wisconsin-Northern Michigan District with an offer to donate the hospital.

On Dec. 29, 2000, Aurora transferred four buildings, totaling 321,000 square feet, to the newly incorporated nonprofit organization known today as City on a Hill. The ministry has since sold about 160,000 square feet for the development of affordable housing. Remaining facilities provide ample room for an array of services.

The cooperative spectrum of churches and ministries in that original Convoy of Hope event is reflected in a free community health clinic on Nov. 13, 2010, the day after the Passport to Compassion.

Diane and her team meet in the first-floor chapel with a record-breaking group of about 150 volunteers. Participants shout out their home church: “Covenant Presbyterian!” “Emmanuel United Methodist!” “Living Waters Assembly of God!” “Poplar Creek Church (AG, John Davis, City on a Hill board chairman, senior pastor)!” “Peace Lutheran!”

During the morning and afternoon, about 250 guests circulate among various resource stations. There are donated clothes to try on — most important, a wide selection of winter coats. Volunteers operate distribution points for free groceries and hygiene kits. Medical volunteers carry out blood sugar and cholesterol tests and administer flu shots. Free eye exams draw a capacity crowd to one large room, and donated eyeglasses are professionally matched to prescriptions.

As he receives his flu shot, Franklin Atwater describes a serious bout with flu he recently endured.

“I had come home one day, and I just fell on the floor. I live alone. There was no food in the house. It was terrible.”

Franklin is grateful for more than the flu vaccine.

“The courtesy ... the volunteers ... it’s fantastic,” he says with a smile.

Dr. Bonnie Tesch is medical director of the City on a Hill Medical Clinic. The clinic’s roots go back to 2000 as part of the original Convoy of Hope outreach.

“We had a health tent,” Dr. Tesch remembers, “and it went from there.”

Dr. Tesch and Nursing Coordinator Karrol Miranda looked to two models when creating the clinic. The parish nursing model allows a church to sponsor basic medical care in a community. Dr. Tesch’s home church at the time, Brookfield Assembly, now Victory International Fellowship, was the first AG church in the nation to use parish nursing as an outreach. Their second model was AG HealthCare Ministries, with which they have traveled on many medical missions trips.

“We want to touch people physically and spiritually and emotionally, and then offer them a safe haven to come to every month,” Dr. Tesch says of the ministry at City on a Hill she coordinates with several other doctors, Karrol and nurse Gloria Echols. “In the process, we can use that as a tool to reach them for Christ.”

As lunchtime approaches, the cafeteria is a hub of activity. The kitchen crew quickly serves a steady stream of guests all the food they care to eat.

Ella Vance has brought her children Latavia, Jacob and Antwaun. She is thankful for the meal and the offer of basic healthcare. The afternoon is an oasis in a challenging week.

“I’m on my way upstairs to get my blood pressure checked,” she says. “After this, I’m going home, and I’ve got to go wash clothes. A mom’s work is never done.”

Sometimes the simplest gestures make a powerful impression.

“I got a nice pair of socks,” says Art Weber. “I’m happy they’re both black ones.” He looks at nearby volunteers and adds: “A lot of organizations have to stop because they can’t get volunteers. But these volunteers are from churches all over.”

Back in the first-floor chapel, a steady hum of prayer arises as volunteers meet with guests and intercede for their needs. Max

Lenyard, a Parklawn AG volunteer, has a voice of biblical proportions. For him, a day of giving back at the community clinic is replete with the joy of the Lord.

“I’ve been where a lot of these people have been,” he intones in a penetrating bass as nearby volunteers continue to pray with guests. “I was on drugs and alcohol for more than 26 years. I was homeless. When the door opened for me to volunteer here after God had just done miraculous things in my life, this was the opportunity. I’ve been doing it now for about a year, and it’s wonderful; it’s awesome.”

Many people, Max explains, are praying for jobs. The great majority, he says, ask for prayer for their safety. He has just prayed with a young couple from Chicago.

“They’re living on the streets and want safety,” he says. “A lot of them want God. They want to have hope. The Word of God can give them hope, like it did me.”

### **The upstream generation**

“When I first came and talked to other ministry leaders and saw how adults’ lives were being destroyed,” Diane remembers, “it was like jumping into a rushing river to catch them up. To pull adults out of destructive lifestyles and disciple them so they can walk with Christ is a challenge. It feels like for every one you rescue, another 100 rush downriver.”

As that image of a river of lost souls consumed Diane, she sensed the Lord’s direction.

“I felt like He was telling us to go upstream and reach people before they find themselves washed away. It is a lot easier to prevent a life becoming so troubled than to rescue one.”

To accomplish this goal, City on a Hill offers a full range of ministries to children. Besides weekly Royal Rangers and Mpack Girls clubs, there is an after-school care program that takes children off the streets during some of the most vulnerable hours of the day. Instead of being recruited by local gangs or left to their own poor choices in empty apartments, these kids can enjoy games, exercise equipment and even group birthday parties — and learn about the God who loves them.

In preparation for the November health clinic, kids pack more than 200 hygiene kits.

“Our drop-in center kids absolutely love doing community service,” says Brooke Chapman, director of missions and outreach. “It’s one of the biggest things we do at the center, at least once a week. It’s a way for them to give back. They can relate with the people we are serving. They understand how blessed they are compared to some we help.”

Diane knows that behind every smiling face lies an invisible and often painful history.

“If you knew the stories of many of the kids you see here having fun, you would be shocked at what has happened in their lives,” she says. “Some have been assaulted. Some have carried weapons or used drugs.

Some were in gangs or were recruited to join them. Some were bound by fear. But when you see them here, they're free to be children."

Free enough, she hopes, to make the critical choice that will transform their lives for eternity. She prays they will make that choice at a younger age than she made hers.

### **One mission, different journeys**

Diane accepted Christ as her Savior at 39. She was a single mom of two trying to work two minimum-wage jobs while going back to school. As her children grew up, she joined Aurora Health Care and rose through the ranks to become a vice president.

She felt blessed to have overcome the dysfunction of an abusive marriage in her 20s, blessed to live with the assurance of her faith in Christ, blessed to see her own circumstances turn from poverty to financial stability and even comfort.

When she helped Aurora put together the donation plan for the Good Samaritan property, Diane was just a Christian professional happy to give other followers of Christ an opportunity to change their corner of the world. She never dreamed she would be asked to serve on the board of City on a Hill. She absolutely never imagined God would call on her to resign from Aurora and serve as director.

But she believes every member of her team has been handpicked by God to bring their life experiences into the daily mix of City on a Hill's mission.

"Our staff has had struggles that have caused them to be compassionate and have a heart," she says. "We have an interesting mix of people who grew up in the church strongly disciplined and those from outside, the opposite extreme. It's interesting how everyone's walk has brought them here. You look at any one of us individually and wonder how we could accomplish much. But you put us together and ... well, Scripture says God uses the weak to show himself strong."

With the continued support of pastors and leaders across the Wisconsin-Northern Michigan District, Diane believes the future for City on a Hill holds great promise.

"The district took a huge leap of faith and trusted God to help them turn this abandoned hospital into a tool to reach Milwaukee," she says. "This is a city of great need. But we serve a great Savior, and we want to share His love with even more of Milwaukee's hurting families."

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SCOTT HARRUP is managing editor of the *Pentecostal Evangel*.

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