

# Guilty bystanders

Why would churches want their members to sit on the sidelines?

**C**AN OTHER CHURCHES DO WHAT LEESBURG'S First Baptist (story, p. 24) has done? It depends on their theological understanding. In their book *Meeting Needs, Sharing Christ: Ministry Evangelism in Today's New Testament Church*, Charles Roesel (First Baptist's pastor) and Donald Atkinson state, "Evangelism that does not minister to the needs of the whole person falls short of the New Testament standard. . . . Evangelism that sees persons only as souls to be saved is deficient, at best; in light of the incarnation, it may even be considered unbiblical."

At the time of Christ, they write, "Jewish religious leaders certainly made no concerted effort to reach out to Gentiles with redemptive love. . . .

Part of their hatred of Jesus grew from the fact that He was unaffected by the barriers they had erected. Gentiles, Samaritans, tax gatherers, prostitutes, lepers, women—all experienced Jesus' redemptive love." Today, though, some Christians "hide behind the church building's protective walls. This kind of siege mentality sees the real world as the enemy of piety and separation from the world as the highest expression of faith. . . . An unfortunate reality is that a person can use church activities to avoid a hurting world."

They stress the importance of avoiding problems that harmed Christianity long ago and still pop up. Gnostics, for example, believed that being human was a curse because "all flesh was evil," and thought that "salvation belonged to the elite, who were able to grasp the secret knowledge of humanity's nature." Institutionalists, who arose when the post-Constantine church became the Roman Empire's official religion in 380 A.D., loved official church activities and contended that "the individual existed to serve and strengthen the institution rather than the church's existing to evangelize and minister to individuals. Church leaders became masters instead of servants."

*Meeting Needs, Sharing Christ* also criticizes monasticism, within which "holy men removed themselves from the world by withdrawing from society and living in solitude or in tightly controlled communities." These individuals were dedicated, but "withdrawal from the world of sin and struggle is a far cry from the hands-on approach of Jesus

and the earthly church." Pastor Roesel emphasizes hands-on ministry and the more hands the better: "If church leaders feel that they must control everything in the church's ministry, they are unlikely to permit members to use their gifts. . . . Pastors are 'player coaches' [who] affirm, train, and enable members to use their gifts in ministry."

The recent life of Howard Vesser shows one result of that coaching. Dr. Vesser, who directs the church's medical center, is an orthopedic surgeon who retired from his practice in 1995 when he was 63. "I was going to learn to play golf," he explains, but when he had hip surgery and also joined First Baptist in 1998, he started going to morning coffees at the church, where members discussed

creating a church-run medical center. Dr. Vesser became a full-time volunteer: "I missed being important," he grins. "I can't stand being on the sidelines."

Wanda Kohn became active through a different process. In 1977, at age 17, she had an abortion that led to "a hardening," she recalls. "I became emotionally unattached." Nevertheless, during the 1980s she became a Christian and came to understand that women who had aborted could still receive God's forgiveness. The hardened shell disappeared and, helped by preaching that emphasized the centrality of helping others, she

volunteered with Habitat for Humanity and now directs the church's Pregnancy Care Center: "I didn't know I had an option to sit on the sidelines."

First Baptist has even impressed liberal journalists such as *Orlando Sentinel* columnist Lauren Ritchie, who wrote in 2003 that the church "has a tremendous ministry with the most down-on-their-luck people in the county." The headline of Ms. Ritchie's article was striking—"Wanda Kohn—she is what I want to be"—and so was the lead: "Once a year, I have lunch with Wanda Kohn to remind myself of what I should be like, if ever I could." She called Ms. Kohn "Leesburg's version of Mother Teresa. . . . At lunch she will say, 'Let's have a blessing.' You do not say, 'Skip it this time.' . . . She is passionately anti-abortion, but tempers it with practicality that provides a place to live and diapers."

Passion combined with practicality can make an entire community rejoice. ☉

