



Seminarian Lives Out Vision of Ministry at Barnes Mountain

While Steve Smith and Carter Paden were doing their summer internships through the seminary in Sewanee, Wilson "Doc" Whitaker was working as a summer intern at St. Timothy's Mission, Barnes Mountain, Kentucky, in the Diocese of Lexington. Doc is a middler at the Episcopal Theological Seminary in Lexington. He continues to serve as seminarian assistant at St. Timothy's.

by
Doc Whitaker

Barnes Mountain lies on the Estill-Lee County line not far from Lock 17 on the Kentucky River. You will not find it on the state highway map. People in the county seat of Irvine have to think a minute before they can tell you how to get there. There are two small stores. One sells gas. The Pepsi truck runs once a week. Many residents purchase water from a tanker that plods up and down Highway 851.

The people are that unique Scotch-Irish stock that is as beautiful, tough and gentle as the mountains on which they live. And live there they have, for generations. And live there they will continue, you will be told, for generations after you are gone.

They instinctively reach out to the lonely, feed the hungry, tend the sick, and comfort the dying in their midst. They are also instinctively reserved. They have learned repeatedly the pain of trusting too quickly those who would use them for personal gain. Yet they always welcome strangers.

St. Timothy's Mission is a forty-acre farm which includes the church, a guest house (both log structures), a farm house and a tool shed converted to a bath house. There is a pre-school building under construction. The farm project consists of four acres of cucumber fields and over 2000 Scotch pines to be harvested as Christmas trees beginning in 1992. Sequential plantings continue. As the land is being cleared, firewood is cut and sold in Lexington through church bulletins and word of mouth. All this has been done in four years.

So my children (ages 2 and 4) and I move into a back room of the farmhouse for the summer. I watch as work camps, visiting dignitaries and pilgrims pass through the Mission. I listen to college interns, staff and to the people of the mountain. There are problems. Anyone can be happy for two hours on Sunday, but these people are all in the Mission together for hours each day - teaching kids, cooking meals, working the farm, writing press releases, selling clothing. They are trying to work out their common ministry in community. For hundreds of years, the only way the church could do that was in cloistered silence. The people of St. Timothy's are light years beyond that.

I ran a gas station in the mountains of North Carolina before coming to seminary. I am not, as they say, a professional. I do o.k. in the fray. But I insist on

engaging the community as a distant cousin from across the mountains instead of as an intern who's "just passing through".

The bright spot is the day camp for the children of the mountain. I teach four Christian ed. classes a day and supervise the noonday service. The incorrigible, unteachable terrors of the Estill County school system turn out to be the sweetest, brightest, best behaved kids I've ever worked with. There is a 13-year old math wiz. There is a 10-year old who writes poetry. There is another 10-year old who can match me story for story from the Old Testament. "What is prayer? What is forgiveness? What is a sacrament?" There are 8 and 9 year olds who know more hot theology than the Jesuits.

The older kids instinctively and naturally take care of the younger kids, including mine. They pack them up and down the hill, take them to the bathroom, dress them before and after swimming, make sure they eat. Looks like *diakonia* to me. The church should act like this.

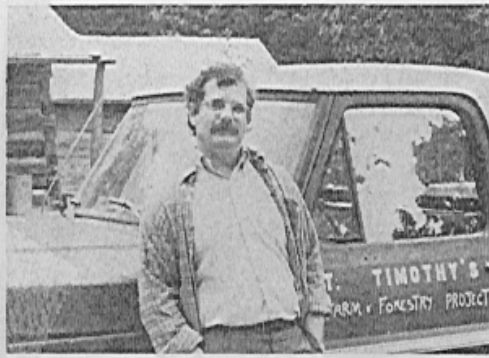
The Barnes Mountain Child Development Center is a ministry of St. Timothy's Mission. The center's primary objective will be to provide badly needed pre-school and kindergarten instruction for local children. Our child development program will be structured to meet the particular needs of the children of the mountain. The school will also serve as a center for on-going adult education, nutrition and health programs. There is no community center of any kind at present.

Missionary-teacher Roland Allen wrote that the Holy Spirit will give the local Christian community its mission and empower it with all the resources needed to enable that mission. The Holy Spirit wills that there be a pre-school on Barnes Mountain. And nothing... not building codes, nor money, nor bureaucrats, not even the unyielding face of the mountain seems to be able to stand in the way. If septic lines have to stretch down the mountain, if doors have to be firewalls, if rangehoods have to be stainless steel, if there have to be bathrooms and wash basins enough for an army, the Holy Spirit will have the pre-school and no one can stop it. It's a slow motion miracle, a graceful, glorious, frightening thing to watch.

A lot has been written about Barnes Mountain in the last few years. Most of it, however unintentionally, has been insensitive and condescending. I have done no better. I understand that work camps can build bathrooms and those who come with some need to minister are ministered to instead. It happens; I'm grateful. But it's not the major learning. The Good News is that the New Testament idea of the church as a sacrament of the Holy Spirit is alive and well on Barnes Mountain.

It was the people of the mountain who requested a church house and regular services when the "institutional church" thought its ministry was restricted to day camps and a clothing outlet. It was the people of this new mission church who had the

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Doc Whitaker relaxes for a few moments during his work at St. Timothy's.

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vision of a school for the children and have faithfully and prayerfully watched that vision become reality. It is the people of the mountain who staff a mission that has more programs than most of the churches five, six, seven times its size. It is the people of the mountain in whom I continue to find the risen Christ.

There are some who say we're a "success story in mission". No one here really feels like a success. We have setbacks. And we are so unique, so small and so vulnerable, that setbacks shake the foundations. Dozens of years will pass before we know whether the church's mission on Barnes Mountain is a success. We do realize that we are on the cutting edge of something new. Cutting edges have a different feel than success.

Trickle down mission programs rarely work. Indicators of success at St. Timothy's seem to be inverse to the distance from which the programs originate and the slickness of the paper on which they arrive. Effective mission programs should spring from the spiritual life of the mission community itself, which is then empowered to carry them out. Instead, the church usually ends up trying to tell people what their needs and gifts are. The church's role may simply be to proclaim the Gospel, present the traditions and midwife the response.

Finally, there always seems to be a tension in missionary circles between corporeal acts of mercy and evangelism. The people of St. Timothy's Mission are living witness to the truth that one is the natural consequence of the other. They possess an incredible charisma. Something is going to happen; I don't know what it is. But for now, I feel ever so blessed that I may stand among them and join in their antiphon: "The Spirit of the Lord has come upon us, and we and this place will never be the same."

Sunday at St. Timothy's Mission

