

TAR PAPER AND LACE

BUILDING A NAZARENE COMPASSIONATE MINISTRY NETWORK IN OKLAHOMA CITY

Chapter 2: Bag Angel

First Indian Church of the Nazarene is many things to many people. To Southern Nazarene University freshman, it is urban ministry. To Wayne and Alice Stark it is a sacred calling. To the parishioners who drive in from the middle class suburbs, it is obedience. To the ladies who attend Bible Study, it is koinonia. To Marcia Jeffries and Reba Rodgers, it is miraculous. To an angel, it is an ordained destination.

Larry Jeffries and Marcia Lingo ministered in the tar paper community along with the Starks in the 1960s. When the Starks returned to the inner city in 1996, Larry and Marcia, now married, welcomed their old friends home in the best way they knew: The Jeffries' Sunday School Class pledged to serve beefy casseroles, tossed salads, and sheet cakes to the 1st Indian Church congregation once a month.

"We knew God had blessed us with everything we needed," said Marcia. "But I think I had this notion of being a do-gooder because we were feeding people . . . and mind you, these were people who never knew where their next meal would come from. But I realized pretty quickly that I needed an attitude adjustment."

"That's because I ended up being blessed myself."

["Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward them for what they have done," (Proverbs 19:17).]

Whom does God consider to be poor? When have you been poor?

How would our kindnesses change if we thought of them as gifts lent to God?]

"I remember the first time we took food," Marcia says. The memory is as fresh as a new loaf of bread. "I smiled and reached out to each woman who came through the line."

"Thank you," whispered a young mother with a baby in her arms. A teenage girl murmured, "You're awful kind," as her older sister gulped and said, "It smells good." Each one kept her head bowed, as if studying the cracks in the linoleum.

"Each of those women had given up on life," muses Marcia. Soon thereafter Marcia and her best friend Reba launched a Ladies Bible Study. At first they met at one of 1st Indian's recovery houses where the ladies sat on a threadbare plaid sofa and an assortment of wooden dining chairs. "Lord, this is a big work," Marcia sobbed out loud on the way home the first night. 'How can we get these ladies to trust us, to believe in us, to work with us?'" The outreach continued, as did the heartfelt prayers. One year passed, then two, then three.

"Are we making a difference with these ladies?" Reba wondered out loud. "They don't trust us, do they?" responded Marcia, "And our numbers are dwindling. I don't think we're getting anywhere."

On a humid night in August, a woman pulling a wire cart stepped into the 1st Indian Church sanctuary as Marcia and Reba prepared to lead their final Bible Study. With sorrowing hearts, the two friends directed a discussion on *Keeping Your Heart Tuned to God's Leading*. Into the heavy silence that followed,

the elderly visitor stood and asked, "May I say something?" Graying streaks of hair framed her face like wings. "I've never been here before, but I have a message for you."

"God says you're not to stop this Bible Study. It does make a difference and it will impact others."

No one moved or spoke as the bag lady turned and walked out the door. "Please wait," Marcia called out as she pushed back from the table. "I didn't even get your name!"

Running out into the dusky evening, Reba and Marcia looked every which way but up. "She couldn't have gotten away that quickly," panted Reba. "not even a sprinter moves that fast."

"She's just disappeared into thin air," marveled Marcia.

["Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?"

(Hebrews 1:14).

What is the twofold promise contained in this scripture?]

Yet that heavenly visitor made a lasting impression. "From then on, our group began to grow," says Marcia, awe still fresh in her voice, "and today, 15 years later, we are a strong, united group striving to be obedient followers of Christ."

"One of my favorite ladies, Diane, used to be street mean; she always fought and usually drank. Sometimes she'd come to



Bible Study, then she'd stop coming. But she's different now. Her heart is tender."

After a recent fellowship, Diane took out a stack of notes tied with red and gold ribbon "See these?" she said to Marcia. "I read them all the time."

"Really?" asked Marcia, looking for a clue in the satisfied smile on Diane's face. "What are they?"

"Don't you see, Marcia? These are the notes you've sent me. I read them all the time."

On the drive home that night, Marcia's eyes were too blurred with tears to recognize the bag angel hovering nearby.

["You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent. LORD my God, I will praise you forever," (Psalm 30:11-12).

What characteristics of true joy make it like a garment?

How can a heart express praise to God?]