

An Ordinary Woman Doing Extraordinary Things

Once a high fashion designer, Elizabeth Copeland became a missionary when she stopped running from God's call.

This year the Church of God in Christ's Women's Department is celebrating its 50th anniversary. Through the years one of its international evangelists, Dr. Elizabeth Copeland, has contributed invaluable service to women and children.

Copeland has undergirded her ministry with the firm belief that every person has the potential to become what God created him or her to be. She put her belief into practice by single-handedly developing a ministry that has touched the lives of people around the world.

Her outreach programs in Third World countries have enabled scores of poor people to improve their living conditions by developing skills that enable them to become independent and self-sustaining. In the Philippines, for example, Len Carpio, a member of a Church of God in Christ Church in Magalang, is delighted to tell visitors how "Dr. Copeland provided some of us women with sewing machines. We started making clothes for our customers."

A LEGACY OF GIVING

Copeland has a deeply rooted love and concern for other people, and she comes by it honestly. Her grandfather gave refuge to fellow African Americans at the turn of the 20th century to protect them from being beaten.

"My dad's father was a Baptist preacher who used to hide black people [from pursuers]," Elizabeth recalls. "Freedom to live as a decent human being is something that I learned early in life from my grandfather."

Elizabeth saw similar examples lived out by other family members. Her mother was a descendant of Cherokee Indian farmers who were known for their generosity and always grew enough food to share.

"We grew up learning not only how to share one's food," Elizabeth remembers, "but learning to wait till everyone else had food before we took our own portion."

When Elizabeth was just a newborn, her family wasn't sure if she'd live long enough to emulate her parents' and grandparents' qualities. Born with a badly deformed ear, she contracted malaria when she was 2 months old. Although doctors gave her only three to six months to live, Elizabeth clung to life and proved them wrong.

She survived but grew up as a sickly little girl who could not play like other children. Then, at age 5, she experienced her first miracle.

"My left ear was just a lump of flesh," Copeland says. "But I heard my mother pray for healing over other people, and I asked her to pray for God to give me a left ear. After a while my ear started growing." Today, Elizabeth's ear and hearing are perfectly normal.

Because of Elizabeth's poor health, her mother, a traveling Pentecostal preacher, took Elizabeth everywhere she went. They traveled through the South on trains during the time when African Americans were segregated from whites.

"We had to pay extra to ride the back part of the train," Elizabeth remembers, "but it turned out to be a blessing because the Pullman cars had beds, and those were the days when there were no hotels for black people."

Blessings notwithstanding, Elizabeth was not at all interested in following in her mother's footsteps. "I told myself I would not be a missionary when I grew up," she says.

BECOMING A MISSIONARY

As Elizabeth grew older and ventured out on her own, she encountered more and more difficulty trying to ignore God's call on her life. When she was living in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, a gang broke into her home and stole a valuable rare coin collection.

"They used a 3-year-old to crawl through my bedroom window," Elizabeth recalls. All the youngsters were apprehended, and the police were about to put them in a juvenile home when the Lord spoke to Elizabeth's heart.

"The Spirit of the Lord told me that those children should not be put in jail and that instead I should form a group that would minister to them," she remembers.

Elizabeth acted on that prompting and persuaded the police department to release the youngsters into her custody. That was the beginning of her ministry, an outreach program she called the "I Care Ministry."

A local judge, Alcee Hastings, took notice of Elizabeth's efforts and later helped her to set up a nonprofit organization. I Care Ministry taught at-risk youngsters crafts and basic life skills.

"The kids learned how to go to the store to buy groceries and how to do things that normal people take for granted," Elizabeth says. "Give them the opportunity, and problematic kids will make something of themselves."

What caring adults must do, in her view, is "to take the time to listen to these kids and to talk to them. Given some love and attention, such children won't end up in the streets doing drugs and crime."

As a young career-minded single, Elizabeth soon found herself pursuing her interest in fashion design. She became very

successful, designing clothes for such celebrities as Sammy Davis Jr., the Supremes and Eunice Kennedy. Ironically, it was this glamorous job that introduced Elizabeth to the rampant poverty in Third World countries. It was an introduction that changed the course of her life.

Traveling to the Caribbean for a design project, Elizabeth saw firsthand how difficult life in those islands was for the poor. She quickly returned to Haiti via a missions trip, which marked the beginning of scores of trips to the island to serve Haitian people.

Elizabeth helped three remote villages obtain potable water by piping the source of water through a 10-mile pipe. "It used to be that women had to walk 10 miles with water buckets on their heads to get drinking water," Elizabeth says.

"But with the help of engineers from the University of Florida, we were able to build PVC pipes that delivered water from its source to those villages." The effort enabled the village people to get water out of a faucet for the first time in their lives.

During the next 15 years, Elizabeth's missionary efforts extended to Jamaica, Barbados and the Bahamas, as well as to additional areas in the United States. She formed the "Yes, I Can" organization, which offers workshops and job services for unemployed and underprivileged U.S. college graduates.

THE LEGACY CONTINUES

Today, Elizabeth is married to a Pentecostal pastor, and they have six grown children, three of whom are adopted. They also help more than 30 other children who are in and out of their home.

"We like helping kids," Elizabeth points out, "particularly those who come from dysfunctional families and need love and discipline from adults."

Most of the time, she says, they leave the Copeland nest emotionally secure and financially independent.

History repeated itself with one of Elizabeth's own sons, Thomas, who also was a sickly child. Because of his frequent illnesses, Elizabeth often took Thomas along with her on trips. As a result, Thomas is now a youth minister.

"I am proud of him," Elizabeth says. "He is very effective with young people, many of whom he has influenced to quit smoking and using drugs."

Elizabeth now devotes much of her time to traveling around the United States and conducting workshops for future missionaries. She visits the Philippines several times a year to do missions work and to serve as jurisdictional supervisor of all the work with women for the Church of God in Christ. She is also organizing a medical missions team of doctors, nutritionists and other health care professionals to take to Israel in December 2002.

"My goal in my work," Elizabeth says, "is to identify the talents and potential of marginalized people, particularly women, and to bring out this potential into productive use."

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