

Open Heart Open Door

FROM THE TIME SHE WAS A LITTLE GIRL, MOTHER BLANCHE BELL WEAVER HAS OPENED HER HEART AND HER HOME TO THOSE LESS FORTUNATE THAN HERSELF.

Mother Blanche Bell Weaver, 77, founded the Rescue Outreach Mission—a ministry to the homeless and hungry—in Sanford, Florida, in November 1987. But the roots of this ministry go back many years.

From the time Mother Weaver was a little girl, she has had a heart for those less fortunate than herself. Raised in Atlanta by foster “parents” who gave her everything, she felt keenly the needs of children living in poorer neighborhoods nearby. When her parents would go off to work, she would call the children into her yard and provide meals for them that she had cooked herself.

Sometimes she would give away her own shoes to children who had none. Though hard pressed to explain their disappearance to her parents, she seemed unable to withhold anything from the little ones around her who lacked the basic necessities of life.

REACHING OUT The purpose of Mother Weaver’s ministry today is the same as it was when she was young—to reach out to people in need. “It’s just in my heart; I can’t help it,” she says.

Mother Weaver’s compassion for the poor led her, as an adult, to open her door as well as her heart to the disadvantaged in Sanford. For many years she used her own home to feed and house those who came to her, particularly children whose parents were unable or unwilling to care for them. Hundreds found refuge there, and a number of them have come back to thank her for her love and generosity.

But Mother Weaver wasn’t satisfied with the scope of that

outreach. She wanted to minister to the whole person, addressing spiritual as well as physical needs.

To fulfill her vision, she established the Rescue Church of God in Sanford. Lacking any formal Bible training but confident that she was called and anointed to teach, she stepped out to pastor the fledgling church, which opened its doors in the mid-1960s.

After the church was founded, God began to speak to Mother Weaver about feeding the poor on a larger scale than she was doing at home. Initially she thought He was calling her to use the church for this purpose. Although the facilities there weren't sufficient for such a big task, she stepped out in obedience to provide for the hungry in her community.

It didn't take God long to redirect her. He wanted her to think big, to have faith for a separate facility that could accommodate the large numbers of people He would send to her.

Mother Weaver had no trouble believing God; she is a woman who, by her own admission, has always lived by faith. But it wasn't until a friend of hers told her the property across the street from the church was for sale that she saw how graciously God had provided: The price of the land was only \$10.

"I sent someone to get the money out of the bank right away," Mother says. Later she wondered why the friend who had told her about the land hadn't bought it herself; it was such a bargain. Mother realized there could be only one reason: God had wanted her to have it so she could fulfill the dream He had given her.

A SECOND SHELTER Within a short time Mother Weaver arranged for men to clear the land and begin making the dream a reality. The first structure built for the mission was equipped with facilities so that Mother Weaver's church didn't have to cook and serve large amounts of food. It also had

dorms furnished with beds for the homeless.

The structure was designed to house men on one side and women and children on the other, with a common eating area and a chapel in the middle. This was a difficult arrangement. Often the children were missing their daddies and went looking for love. They would try to wander over to the men's side.

"I used to have to sit up all night in the common area to make sure they didn't go from one side to the other," Mother Weaver says. "So I asked God, 'What am I going to do? I can't watch these people's children all the time.'"

In February of 1997 the Lord allowed her to open a separate shelter for women and children just a few yards away from the original building, which is currently the men's facility. The two groups now have distinct living and eating quarters and are cared for by different staff. Mother Weaver, the executive director over both outreaches, generally oversees the men's shelter, while her daughter, Sylvia Drake-Izquierdo, who is the mission's administrative director, keeps a close eye on the Open Door Shelter for Women.

The function of both shelters, however, is the same: to provide emergency housing, food, clothing and spiritual guidance to disadvantaged and needy persons of any age, race or national origin. They also share a common goal—to help hurting people get back on their feet and become productive and responsible citizens with the hope of Christ in their hearts.

The success rate of the two shelters is phenomenal. Only about 5 percent of residents ever return for additional help once they have received aid and leave the mission.

The mission can accommodate approximately 80 people at any given time for short-term residence. All clients receive three nutritious meals a day, which are prepared not only for them but also for others in the community who are hungry and

unemployed.

Mother Weaver's husband, Thomas "Pop" Weaver, age 76, is the head cook. He plays "a big, big part" in the work of the mission, his wife says. Pop prepares and helps serve an average of 6,000 meals per month.

In addition to shelter, food and clothing, clients who stay at the mission receive counseling to learn a better way of living. They benefit from child care, job placement and housing assistance services. Those who require aid beyond what the mission offers are given referrals to other agencies that are equipped to help them on a continual basis.

But Mother Weaver rarely turns anyone away. Even those who would be better served by a different type of organization are often taken in because they can't afford proper aid. "We get a lot of people who need to be in a nursing home," Mother says. "I'm not supposed to take them in. But what am I going to do? They have nowhere to go. They're trembling and cold and nasty and hungry."

To this day, the Rescue Outreach Mission is the first and only ministry of its kind in Seminole County, Florida. Funded in part by the United Way, the mission is a nonprofit organization that relies on the generosity of businesses and individuals for much of its financial support.

Mother Weaver does not receive government aid because she refuses to compromise her commitment to the spiritual well-being of the people she helps. A would-be backer once offered support if she would remove the chapel, where services are held nightly, from the mission. "No way," she told him. "I can get more from God than I can from you."

She's now asking God to increase His provision so she can open a child care center and a low-rent apartment building for people to move into after they find work and leave the mission. She is determined to do everything she can to keep

them from returning to the streets.

The continued success of the mission, which has not only helped many people get a fresh start in life but also reduced the crime rate in the surrounding area, is due in great part to Mother Weaver's direct involvement in the lives of the people who come there. She preaches to them, gives them advice, holds them accountable and most important, loves them with the love of Christ. This is the key, she believes, to making a difference in their lives.

She plans to keep on making a difference until God tells her to stop. "I don't have to do this," she says. "My house is paid for, I get Social Security, and my husband has a good pension. I do it because God told me to, and I love it."

For more information on the Rescue Outreach Mission, visit the organization Web site at