

Foolish, Stubborn, Underfunded Christians

by **J. Bennett Guess**
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In 1996, while I was pastor of Zion United Church of Christ in Henderson, Ky., our small congregation faced a crisis, trying to cope with increasing numbers of people with HIV/AIDS coming to our open-and-affirming church, seeking friendship and support. Several died; others were chronically ill, lonely and afraid, or financially destitute. We provided extravagant welcome, yes, but we lacked the capacity and services to systemically serve as well as we knew we could.

So, a group of us began discussing how we could become better advocates and caregivers in our part of the world. Under the determined leadership of then-parish nurse Cyndee Burton and a handful of deeply committed church volunteers, Matthew 25 AIDS Services was formed.

Today, celebrating its 20th anniversary, Matthew 25 employs 25 specialized caregivers, alongside nearly 100 volunteers, in serving a current caseload of 509 patients in 25 Kentucky counties and others from southwest Indiana and southern Illinois. Its case management services include specialized medical care and medication assistance; mental health, dental and vision services; help with insurance premiums; housing, utility and transportation assistance; and groceries and nutritional supplements. Matthew 25's annual budget significantly dwarfs, several times over, the budget of the congregation that birthed it.

Also, twenty years ago this year, in Evansville, Ind., just across the Ohio River from Henderson, a group of UCC leaders were busy cobbling together funds to purchase an abandoned downtown warehouse with hopes of greatly expanding the five-year labors of Bethel United Church of Christ, where a Sunday School class had been lovingly providing two meals daily and laundry services for about 30 homeless men, alongside an emergency night shelter that slept up to 12 in bunk beds.

The new warehouse space enabled United Caring Shelters to broaden its offerings, including free meals daily for hundreds (no questions asked), dormitory space and apartments for individuals and families in transition, and, eventually, an emergency night shelter for women.

Today, United Caring Services — as it’s now known — is a comprehensive ministry grounded in radical unconditional love for the poor, homeless and vulnerable in southwest Indiana, putting into action the belief that every person deserves to be treated with dignity and supported in realizing their God-given potential.

Both Matthew 25 AIDS Services and United Caring Services have significantly expanded and matured since 1996, becoming sophisticated, interfaith non-profits that receive support from various financial sources, including the government. Unless you dig into their histories, or understand the passionate motivations of their leaders to this day, you could unfortunately miss the important fact that they are undeniably — and remarkably — “church.”

The UCC’s Council for Health and Human Service Ministries is a collaborative of nearly 400 community ministries — some quite old and others relatively new — that were all founded just like Matthew 25 and United Caring Services, by church people who once identified a great need, cajoled their friends, held some fundraisers, nurtured organizational structures and, in time, became formidable service institutions — large hospitals and small clinics, retirement communities, continuing care facilities, hospices, services for children and seniors, affordable housing, community foundations and advocacy groups. Collectively, they have shaped our understanding of civil society, but without most of us ever pausing to consider how or why they ever came to be, except that they exist to meet critical human needs.

The imperative to love often finds foolish, underfunded, stubborn yet good-hearted people attempting to make possible what others neglect or refuse to name or see. And, if we’re truthful, most of these pietistic pioneers couldn’t have ever envisioned the huge impact on others their labors of love would have. But dream and scheme they did, and will forever, to the glory of God.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Rev. J. Bennett Guess is a national officer and executive minister of the United Church of Christ. In mid-April, he will assume a new role as Vice President of the UCC’s Council for Health and Human Service Ministries.

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