

The New Friars

The return of Francis and Clare

BY SCOTT BESSENECKER

Trudging up a mountainside in Caracas, Venezuela, 29-year-old Lila Blanchard approaches the squatter settlement she calls home. Noisy children and dogs come alive as she passes the small brick houses piled on top of each other facing the wood shacks which make up this desperately poor slum community. But to Blanchard, these aren't "the poor." These are the people among whom she lives and works—her adopted aunts, uncles, and cousins.

What is it that motivates this young graduate of San Francisco State University to set aside the opportunities for wealth and privilege to live among the poor and marginalized? It's the call of Christ to live a simple, communal life as a servant to the poor—the same call that captivated St. Francis and St. Clare when they were in their 20s and hungered to know spirituality among the poor.

Growing numbers of highly educated, evangelical youth are saying "no" to comfortable salaries in exchange for the privilege of living in slum communities in the developing world. Seeking lives of simplicity, purity, and devotion, these young evangelical "friars" are joining missionary orders that are devoted to ministry among society's dregs. What we're seeing is an evangelical movement akin to the Franciscans.

InnerCHANGE (innerchange.org) is a Christian order composed of communities of missionaries living and ministering incarnationally among the poor. "What we do is substantially different from most mission agencies," says InnerCHANGE founder, John Hayes, who planted himself among the poor of South Central Los Angeles in 1984. "Most agencies working incarnationally among the poor have a high degree of burnout. Our impulse to become an order was to create a structure among the poor that people could join for a lifetime and thrive." To do that InnerCHANGE

weds the contemplative, prophetic, and missionary traditions of the church. And it's working. InnerCHANGE has very little turnover. Those who join this order tend to stay, even though they are living in some of the most intense poverty this world has to offer.

"I longed for a deep and consistent spirituality," says Blanchard of her decision to join InnerCHANGE four years ago after hearing Hayes speak. "I knew that I needed some help and some rhythms for that to happen. I also resonated with the commitment to community that InnerCHANGE holds. I knew that I could not grow or stay long as a missionary without that. I wanted to learn how to serve the poor in a way that was not a Band-Aid solution. I wanted to learn how to walk with and be close to the poor."

Youth movements to the poor

A recent visit by Hayes to Wheaton College stirred up about 100 student interviews for InnerCHANGE. Rich kids in their 20s forsaking comfortable lives in the suburbs in order to live among the poor shouldn't be too surprising. Francis was only 25 years old when he deserted his life as a wealthy playboy and began the Franciscan order. Many of the medieval religious orders were essentially youth movements—started, run, and perpetuated by people in their 20s. Of course, Francis didn't really set out with the intention of founding an order. He heard a voice he believed was God's saying, "Rebuild my house." So Francis left his comfortable home to live in a broken down chapel and rebuild it by putting one stone on top of another. Some of the idealistic and disenfranchised youth of Assisi liked what they saw in him and began to gather around. They started out with the quirky vision of reconstructing chapels as broken as they were, but before

long they found themselves ministering to the poorest social strata of Italy. There was something of Christ in each of the cast-off people that Francis and his friends cared for. In a way, they just wanted to get close to Jesus.

Young men were not the only ones who found Francis' calling attractive. An 18-year-old girl asked him if she could join. It was from this teenager that the Poor Clares, the female Franciscan order, began.

Funny how a group of youth considered "fringe" could start what would become the greatest organized movement to the poor to come out of the church. But something very similar is underway among evangelical youth today. At a time when western churches are dwindling in membership and drowning in wealth, there are signs of a white-hot passion for the gospel that seeks to live among and serve those living at the margins of society.

Word Made Flesh (wordmadeflesh.com) is an evangelical order among the poor begun in 1991. Executive Director Chris Heuertz confesses the order is a collection of broken people. They are also young. The "grandfather" of WMF's work in Romania, David Chronic, is 31. He founded the work in Galati, Romania, seven years ago when he was 24. But this is the norm for a mission whose members range in age from 22 to 36. Beginning in 1994 in Chennai (Madras), India, Heuertz, his wife, and six or seven others sought simply to serve Christ, one another, and the poor—in that order. With 100 missionaries in nine cities and eight countries, Heuertz says they stopped actively recruiting for a season and are just now starting back up. "We do not view growth as a sign of



Heather Meranda

success," he admits. WMF, however, may not be able to hold back the tide of youth longing for the ideals inherent in this evangelical order.

While the medieval obsession with a cloistered, celibate, ascetic experience is not part of the package, intense community is. Based on such countercultural values as obedience, service, brokenness, suffering, and humility, WMF communities form around a commitment first to intimacy with Christ, then to the common life, and finally to the poor among whom they live and serve.

The lost art of vow-making

Where are the Nazarites today? In the Old Testament a man or a woman could make a vow to God and live a life set apart without being part of the priesthood. Why don't we call people to make vows today? When Martin Luther deserted the Augustinian monastic order and condemned the making of vows, he may have left Protestants bereft of an important ingredient for spirituality and service. It's the longing for commitment that is driving young evangelicals to a handful of organizations calling them to high levels of dedication, devotion, and mission.

Servant Partners (servantpartners.org), another organization living and working among the poor, urges their communities to embrace sacrificial living. "We will

***Above:** Angela Heirendt serves with Word Made Flesh in Calcutta, India. Her work includes befriending families who live on the street as well as women and girls who are trapped in prostitution.*

***Left:** Urban Global Trek's Irwin Law lends a hand with the stew, much to the delight of the staff at an orphanage in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.*





seek to die to ourselves in all areas of life: finances, possessions, housing, decision-making, and ministry opportunities,” states one of the guiding principals for their lifestyle. “Instead of seeking status and honor among our peers, we must look to be servants.”

Servant Partners was born in the early 1990s through the vision of a handful of young InterVarsity Christian Fellowship staff who were devoted to pressing university students into God’s heart for the poor in inner-city Los Angeles. In 1992 Tom Pratt, then an InterVarsity urban project director, gathered a small group to discuss and pray about some of the prophetic challenges that people like John Perkins and New Zealander Viv Grigg were laying out for the Western church. The following year Pratt founded Servant Partners with a call to become a global mission serving the urban poor in squatter communities in megacities around the world. In the last three years 60 young people have joined this holistic church-planting mission built, at least in part, on the experiences of Grigg.

Above: Urban Global Trek’s David Green horses around with children at a Compassion International community center in Bangkok, Thailand.

Right: Servant Partners’ Hillary Carlson works in a daycare center in Nueva Suyapa, a community on the fringe of Tegucigalpa, Honduras.



(Photo: Cynthia Kramer)

Grigg moved into a squatter settlement in Manila, Philippines, in the 1970s, living out a radical form of incarnational mission. In the 1980s he spit out a string of books and articles calling the church to make room for Protestant missionary orders among the urban poor. Vows would play a key role if these servant movements were to be effective. “Workers with [these movements] make covenants to live lifestyles of non-destitute poverty and simplicity for the sake of identification with the poor.” Responding to the question of the historic monastic commitment to celibacy, Grigg goes so far as to call young people to vows of singleness, at least for a season. “The Protestant ethic, in its reaction to an errant Catholicism, coupled with the breakdown of American family structures, has moved to an extreme worship of comfortable marriage that ignores the pressing urgency of the times and sacrifices needed to redeem the poor of the earth.” Not exactly the sort of thing you hear on family-oriented Christian radio.

Lately, **InterVarsity Christian Fellowship** has begun to call more of its students to join or create mission orders among the poor. InterVarsity’s Global Urban Trek (urbana.org/feat.trek.home.cfm) places students in slum communities in mega-cities like Calcutta, Buenos Aires, Cairo, and Manila for the summer. At the end of the summer, students are invited to stand in response to a sobering call to serve the poorest of the urban poor long-term.

David Von Stroh is one of those Global Urban Trek students to enter long-term service to the poor. Upon graduation

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from MIT with a degree in urban planning in 2003, Von Stroh joined Servant Partners and now lives in a slum community in Bangkok, Thailand, serving the poor there. Several of his Global Urban Trek colleagues are lining up to join him.

A strong sense of call to a sacrificial life among the poor has made it possible for missionaries like Von Stroh to take up residence in a slum community—though he would hardly call it sacrificial. As he began to embrace God’s call to a life of radical devotion to the poor during his last year or two at MIT, Von Stroh felt the rising pressures to “hedge his bets” and double major in something on which he could fall back. Instead he kept on track with his urban planning major with the goal of living among the poor after graduation. “Even if I never used my major, I could always go live in some low-rent, inner-city ‘hood, work at McDonald’s, and share Jesus with my neighbors and coworkers. But now I have my dream job!”

As our age becomes marred by social decay, terrorism, ethnic cleansing, failing economies, and stagnant churches, it’s time for another missionizing monastic-like movement. And if the emerging evangelical youth of the early 21st century are any indication, we may be on the cusp of a fresh expression of this longstanding Christian tradition. Make room for these new friars as they seek the highest spirituality among the lowest on earth. ■

Tameka Harris of Global Urban Trek is flanked by children from the Mokattam garbage-collectors’ community of Cairo, Egypt.

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