

Little Miracles

HOW CHURCHES ARE RESPONDING TO WELFARE REFORM

BY AMY L. SHERMAN

SUPPORTERS AND CRITICS OF WELFARE REFORM agree on at least one thing: Such a momentous change in many Americans' way of life won't succeed without a vigorous increase in outreach to the poor by private institutions, particularly churches. The first responses by churches, though they may not seem dramatic, offer cause for hope. In the relatively brief period since the federal government enacted welfare reform, thousands of church members around the nation have linked arms with individuals trying to make the shift from dependence to work.

Mississippi's Faith & Families program, the country's first major effort to match families on welfare with church members willing to provide financial, practical, and emotional support, has reached 350 families. More than half are now off of cash welfare, and the program has been copied in Louisiana, South Carolina, and Indiana.

In Texas, 219 churches have joined Pathfinder Families, helping 230 welfare recipients trying to find work under Texas's strict time limits.

In Michigan, approximately 50 churches in Ottawa County have helped 60 families exit welfare in just over a year through the Project Zero initiative.

Twenty-one congregations in Anne Arundel County, Maryland, have helped 30 families obtain jobs and leave public assistance through the Community-directed Assistance Program. Two other Maryland counties are reviewing the program with an eye toward possibly emulating it.

In San Diego, a coalition of churches has joined with the Department of Social Services to influence welfare recipients in four poor city neighborhoods. The churches also maintain a "help desk" at the downtown central welfare office that links needy individuals to private-sector resources. A coalition of churches in Charlotte, North Carolina, established a similar "help desk" last fall and is developing a mentoring program to aid newly employed welfare recipients in retaining their jobs.

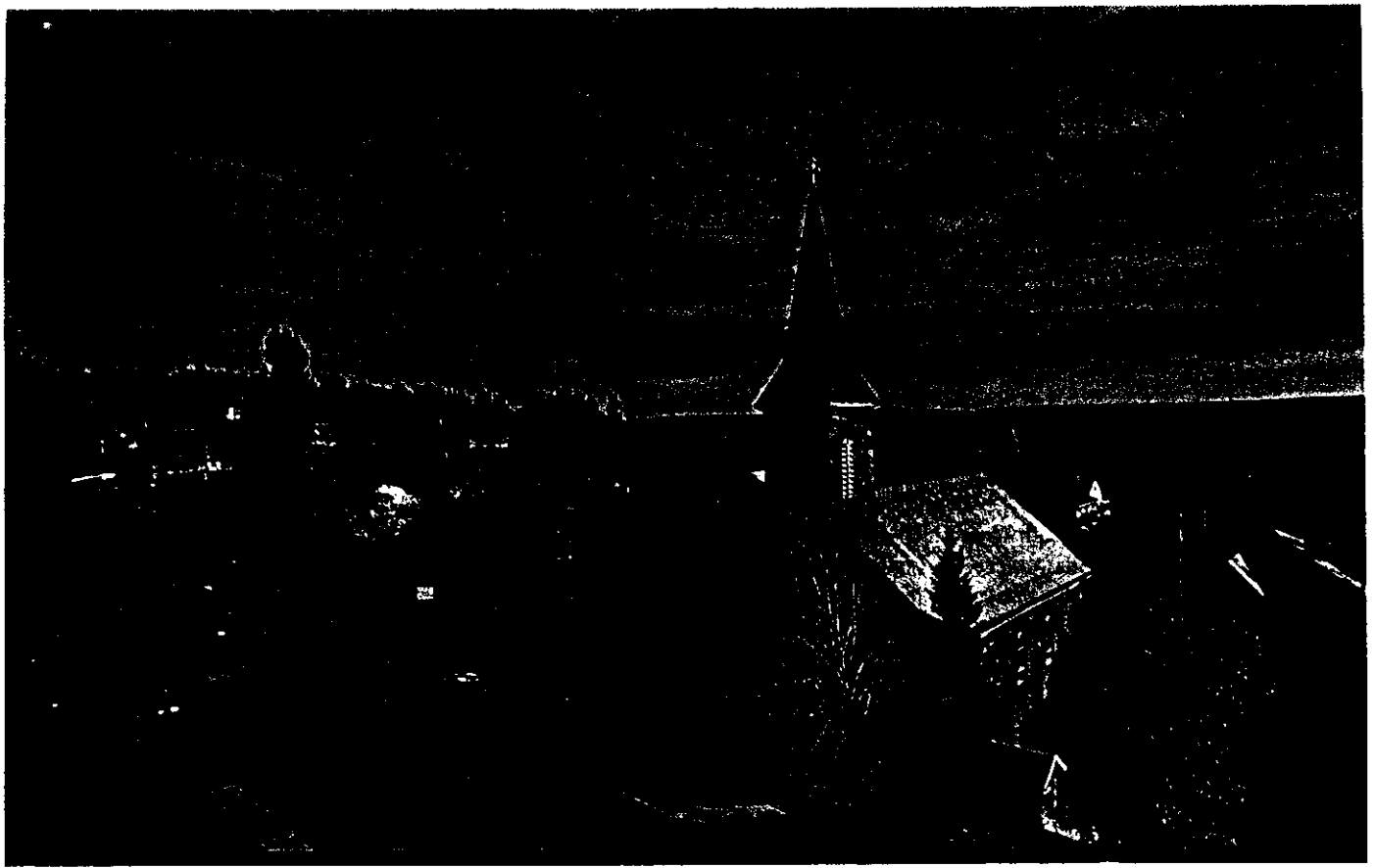
Church-based welfare-to-work mentoring initiatives are also under development in Delaware, New Hampshire, and Washington state. And churches are responding to welfare re-

form in other ways, too. Some, like my own congregation in Charlottesville, Virginia, are pursuing a "neighborhood adoption" model, which focuses a church's financial and human resources on one low-income community. Others have begun "agency adoption" programs, in which churches make money, goods, and volunteers available to a particular social service agency, such as Child Protective Services. In Miami, a coalition of 70 churches has helped 700 elderly and disabled legal immigrants adversely affected by welfare reform. In short, throughout the country, churches of all sizes, stripes, and denominations—white and black, rich and poor, urban and suburban—are intentionally reaching out to needy families. While they have yet to make an appreciable impact relative to the nation's enormous welfare caseload, they have worked some miracles.

OTTAWA COUNTY, one of the six sites in Michigan's Project Zero, recently became the first locality in the United States to move every able-bodied welfare recipient into a job. Governor John Engler credited churches with much of the achievement. The county's Family Independence Agency (FIA), which administers welfare, contracted with a church-based nonprofit called the Good Samaritan Center in July 1996 to mobilize and train church volunteers to mentor and support families moving from welfare to work. The Center convinced nearly 60 churches—about 25 percent of the county's total—to sign up. One of its recruits, Harderwyk Christian Church, exemplifies the full-court press that the religious community can unleash when aiding struggling low-income families. Harderwyk took on six Project Zero applicants, including 24-year-old Rosalinda Ortiz.

Rosalinda had her first child when she was 14. She and her husband, a 15-year-old illegal immigrant, dropped out of high school, and eked out a sparse existence on his meager earnings until immigration authorities deported him. When she heard nothing more from him, Rosalinda got into another relationship, had four more children, and began col-





When church mentors rather than government officials are in charge, there is more urgency behind the drive to end welfare dependency.

lecting welfare. When that man turned abusive, Rosalinda turned to Project Zero.

Rosalinda was linked with a mentor from Harderwyk Church who helped her design a strategic plan to get off welfare. Together they set up a budget that would help Rosalinda begin to climb out of debt. The church gave her an old car and helped her to find work at a greenhouse. Her family moved into a house the church owns, and Rosalinda's \$200 monthly rent payment is deposited into a special savings account that she can eventually use to make a down payment on her own home.

The church's help didn't stop with housing, transportation, and a job. Church volunteers also extracted Rosalinda from a complicated legal morass: She was holding three marriage certificates simultaneously. After the deportation of her first husband, she had agreed to marry another immigrant so he could get into the country. Later, members of her extended family stole her driver's license and birth certificate and forged her signature to marry her to someone else they wanted to get into the United States. Rosalinda's case was also challenging because she quit her greenhouse job after only one month, citing conflicts with the manager. She had to settle for a lower-paying job at Burger King, but recently the church helped her land a factory job paying \$9 an hour.

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"People like Rosalinda come from very, very dysfunctional families. They can't count on them for anything, and the relationships are so messed up," says Ginny Weerstra, one of the volunteers working with Rosalinda. Given her family background, Rosalinda admits that at first it was difficult for her to trust her church mentors. In the last few months, however, Rosalinda has been meeting in a prayer and Bible study group with Weerstra and three other Project Zero participants the church is assisting. "Little by little," Weerstra says, "their defenses have dropped and they've started opening up about their lives with each other. I think it's helped them to realize that there is someone bigger than themselves—God—who's in charge here. I don't think they feel so alone in their battle."

The prayer group has provided not only emotional support, but also a place for moral challenge and accountability. "Rosalinda definitely has an attitude," Weerstra reports, "and she's almost lost a job because of that attitude. So we've been trying to work with her on that, telling her that it's not helping her. I think it's starting to get through, because Rosalinda is really praying about that at the Bible study."

The multi-faceted support that churches such as Harderwyk offer welfare recipients has won them credibility with one local source of private-sector jobs: the Manpower temporary agency. Manpower has designated one staff member to work exclusively with churches in identifying possible employees. "If it weren't for the church support system, Manpower would not be willing to take a risk with some of these families," says Harderwyk's Jay Bangronigan, who oversees the congregation's mentoring program.