

David Kirk: Remembering a Friend

I first met Fr. David Kirk around October 1986, while visiting New York City for several days from the Woodcrest Community in upstate Ulster County. Together with two other members of our group, we had been sent by our community to contact a number of inner-city ministries in Manhattan and the Bronx. We hoped that doors would open to us who had always lived in the security and serenity of the rural Hudson Valley. We were looking for opportunities for young people to experience firsthand the burdens of life for the city's poor, to make friends with people of the streets, and those who served them "in the trenches". We spent time at the Bowery Mission on the Lower East Side, and at the Missionaries of Charity in the Bronx — where we were surprised and thrilled with an unexpected meeting with Mother Teresa herself.

A priest at St. Paul's Roman Catholic Church on 117th Street suggested we talk to Fr. David Kirk at Emmaus House, Harlem and gave us the address. As we found Emmaus House and were introduced to Father David, we did not yet know that a friendship was beginning which would deepen and last for twenty years.

Let me just call him David, as he himself wished to be known. David took time to show us through the house at 124th Street on Lexington Avenue, the former "Hotel Charles". East Harlem was a maelstrom of fast-paced living, bombarding the senses; street and subway traffic, a noisy, gritty, grimy neighborhood notorious for drugs and prostitution. Once inside, we seemed to have stepped into an oasis of peace and creativity, love and joy — clearly a good spirit was present in the house, among its members.

David took us to see the kitchen which served the street each day; the workshop, where formerly homeless men and women could put their talents to work building cabinets for Mt. Sinai Hospital; the rooms where those recovering from street life took pride in establishing a new sense of home and family; the library, where learning and sharing creativity in artwork, music and singing replaced the need for stealing, drugging and drinking; and especially the chapel, where hungry and thirsty souls could find true nourishment and faith for the spirit in listening to the 'still, small voice.'

David's manner was always humble, soft-spoken and gentle, but the strength of his true grit in committed dedication under extreme stress was quickly obvious. He described the many struggles to establish a community of faith for homeless people, many recovering from addiction or living with AIDS. Of having had to rebuild the ruined hotel's interior after angry locals set fire to the early Emmaus effort, outraged that "their" space, now cleaned-up, was off-limits to drug and sex traffickers and their clients.

David recounted the story of his life's work and the influences which radicalized his faith — the Civil Rights movement, Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker in New York, Bishop Raya who ordained him as a priest in Jerusalem, Abbe Pierre and the rag-pickers of Emmaus. We learned of his commitment to non-violence and peace, his tireless participation in civil disobedience to protest the arms race and nuclear madness, his close affinity to the Berrigan brothers and others in the peace movement. The simple truths and commands of the Gospel — compassion for the poor and marginalized, the vision for racial and social justice — clearly lay at the heart of David's whole life and witness.

The years following that first afternoon at Emmaus brought numerous opportunities to share times together with David. He visited our communities for conferences, or just to talk. He sent others from the Emmaus community — residents and volunteers, alike — to share a weekend together with us and tell us about their lives. We traveled to New York with groups of young people to spend Saturdays in 'work camp' experiences — cooking, cleaning, painting, hanging doors and moving furniture. David welcomed us to join in the lifework of Emmaus, serving lunch in the soup kitchen, taking walking tours of the Harlem neighborhoods, sharing fellowship in discussion, prayer, music and song upstairs in the library and in the chapel.

For us who came only occasionally into the city from the fields and forests of upstate, all this was new. We were confronted with the raw life of the ghetto. I doubt if any who watched dope peddlers conducting business from their cars outside Emmaus' front doors, or looked across the street into the gaping, windowless eyes of the adjacent crack houses, or saw junkies shooting up in the alleyway outside the kitchen window, will ever forget these first impressions. Hearing stories from volunteers who witnessed shoot-outs and gun battles, street violence and

desperation, gave pause to consider the relative security and tranquility of our own lives. In this and many other ways, David and his Emmaus community opened our eyes to the realities and challenges of putting faith into practice in today's world, and what it means to 'serve the poor'.

One most memorable day was the occasion of Nelson Mandela's triumphant visit to New York upon his release from decades of captivity on Robben Island, South Africa. I was privileged to take a small group of highschool youth to Harlem for that day, when David and the Emmaus household invited us to join them for a joyous "South Africa Day". The day began with film showings — a documentary of Mandela's life, and the film drama *A Dry White Season* — to all in the house.

After lunch, we set out for the historic rally at *African Square* (Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard at West 125th Street), where a sea of eager New Yorkers anticipated their visit from Mandela and his wife, Winnie. The streets along our route from Emmaus to the rally in front of the towering State Office Building were a throbbing, joyous festival of all things African. Crowds jostled through the sidewalk market where vendors had spread out their crafts, artwork, and merchandise for sale. Bands and small music groups rocked the neighborhood with the sounds of liberty and Africa-power. The air sizzled with the aromas of African cuisine offered at every street corner and wafting from open doorways. *Free Mandela!* — long the battle-cry for liberation from around the globe — shouted out from tie-dyed T-shirts and towels, banners and baseball caps.

The teeming crowds were kept waiting too long as Mandela's motorcade labored uptown from City Hall that sun-drenched, scorching afternoon in Harlem. But the excitement only mounted higher as one performer after another filled the square with music and oratory from the hastily assembled stage across Martin Luther King Boulevard. Finally, when it seemed that the restless excitement had reached fever pitch, the Mandela's arrived to deliver their message of triumph and to receive Harlem's love and adulation.

It was so in keeping with David's global vision for justice to be caught up in this moment of history and with his Emmaus household and all of Harlem to celebrate a dream fulfilled. For those of us who witness it — no, who were swept up in it — who could ever forget?

David's heart was always with those who needed a home, human dignity, respectable work, security, and another chance. No matter what misfortunes may have brought them down — addiction, eviction, AIDS, or prejudice — he was there for them. Not just with a charitable handout and hollow religious words, but with commitment to find a way together, through work, dedication, and service. He always kept the view in mind to give each the fullness they deserved — be it a job, independent living, a restored family. Countless numbers of men and women will thank David for getting them going again on the road to recovery, for believing in them when times were tough, for his certainty that God had a plan for their lives and together it could be found.

But each victory came at a great cost to David personally. His physical health suffered a heavy toll from enduring stress through more than thirty-five years of life in the ghetto, putting the well being of others before his own. It often seemed as though his life would be cut short by illness. In addition to these worries, Emmaus struggled financially, refusing to be bound to “the system” through accepting government grants, but relying on the Provider above and the generosity of supporters.

On the surface, one might think David could easily have given up the struggle long ago. Yet, against mighty odds he held firm to his calling to serve. For him there was never a question of quitting his life's work, his belief in a better world for the poorest of the poor. And thus his witness will live on for all who long for that day, and who know it will cost a great fight, a cause worth living for and dying for.

To sum up, seeing faith in action as David Kirk lived it out ‘in the trenches’ was to be confronted again with the prophetic vision of the peaceable Kingdom, given as a promise by Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord will rest upon him—
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding.
With righteousness he will judge the needy,
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.
Righteousness will be his belt
and faithfulness the sash around his waist.

The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
and a little child will lead them.

They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.

Because in his life, too, David, like the Master of Galilee, had found the place where it is written:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

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