

# Ministry in Appalachia

BY JOHN CICHIELLO/GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

*"God has created me to do him some definite service; he has committed some work to me which he has not committed to another. I have my mission - I may never know it in this world but I shall be told it in the next.*

*"I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. He has not created me for naught. I shall do good, I shall do his work. I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place without intending it - if I do but keep his commandments.*

*Therefore I will trust him. Whatever, wherever I am, I can never be thrown away. If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve him; in perplexity, my perplexity may serve him; if I am in sorrow, my sorrow may serve him; he does nothing in vain.*

*He knows what he is about. He may take away my friends. He may throw me among strangers. He may make me feel desolate, make my spirits sick, hide my future from me - Still he knows what he is about."*

Cardinal John Henry Newman

As a senior at the University of Pennsylvania in 1988, I took Cardinal Newman's words as a jumping-off point for my search for a volunteer experience. For the first time in my life, I felt a strong calling to do something - not from talking with my parents or friends, not from something I had read, but from within myself.

When I found his meditation, it challenged me to find out what God's desire was for this year of service. I was helped through this process by family, friends, that staff at the Newman Center, readings, and much prayer.

About that time, Father Tom Charters of the Glenmary Home Missioners, came to the university to speak. He told us about his order, which serves in rural America, and about the volunteer experiences the order makes available. I decided to try a service week on "The Farm."

The farm is a center for retreat, reflection, and service, and is run by Glenmary in Vanceburg, Ky. Volunteers come to the farm for a week's stay, during which time they work with and visit the region's people.

I decided that visiting the farm would help me to assess my talents and desires for volunteer service. The only year-long opportunity they offered was that of farm manager, dealing with high school and college groups that come to stay at the farm for a week. I was certain I was not interested in that position - I just wanted to serve poor people somewhere.

However, a week on the farm in May of 1988 with two former farm managers convinced me that this opportunity was exactly what I was seeking. I applied and was accepted, serving as one of the farm managers from August, 1988, to May, 1989.

I really felt at home with the people I met and was impressed by the history of Catholic service in the area. Those services included building low-income housing; visiting residents of a nursing home; providing emergency food, shelter and clothing; staffing Bible schools for children over the summer; and dealing with families struggling in all sorts of ways.

Equally appealing to me was the attitude of respect shown for the people of the area. Our job was not to proselytize the Pentecostal church members of the area, but to give a hand to all people who

asked for help. We often shared prayer with our Protestant sisters and brothers. We were not expected to change people, but to make their days a little brighter and, in many cases, to learn from them.

"This Land is Home to Me," a pastoral letter on powerlessness in Appalachia by the Catholic bishops of the region, makes quite strong statements regarding working within rather than striving to change the culture of the mountains.

The bishops wrote:

"Dear sisters and brothers, we urge all of you not to stop living, to be a part of the rebirth of utopias, to recover and defend the struggling dream of Appalachia itself. For it is the weak things of this world which seem like folly, that the Spirit takes up and makes its own. The dream of the mountains' struggle, the dream of simplicity and of justice, like so many other repressed visions, is, we believe, the voice of the Lord among us."

To me - and many others, I am sure - Appalachian culture could be seen in the lives of Charlie, Noah and Hazel Kinney.

Charlie, the elder brother, moved with his mother and father to the farm on Salt Lick when he was 3. He spent the rest of his life there, working the land, hunting for meat, and occasionally making money as a barber and a musician. He played a fiddle, painted pictures and told stories of haunts and ghosts, and of growing up.

Noah, his younger brother, was born in the old log house on the farm and lived there until after his mother died and he married Hazel. He built a smaller home just across the creek on the same piece of property. He worked the land with his brother. He backed up Charlie's fiddle with the guitar, and did wood carvings. His wife, Hazel, is also an artist.

The Kinneys never said 'no' to visitors. I could call them up and say, "I've got a group of 20 high school kids that would like to visit you." Their response would be, "Come on over any time."

Even when Noah was very ill, the response was the same. After a few hours of seeing the old house, listening to Charlie's fiddle music and stories, looking at the artwork and shooting the breeze, we would have to get back to the farm. Their response was: "Don't rush off, now. You know that you're welcome back any time."

The Kinneys have received visitors from all over the United States and the world. They have been featured on the British Broadcasting Corp. (BBC) and the "McNeil Lehrer News Hour" on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). Their artwork is in the permanent collections of Morehead State University and Smithsonian Institute.

Yet they have never had a lot of money. They never expected to have any and never really saw a need for it, except when they had to sell a cow or pig to pay the taxes.

Within the past year Charlie and Noah both died at home, in bed, on the land that has always been their home. They certainly were not perfect. At times you could feel the tension between the brothers. But the happiness they experienced through the simplicity of their life is an inspiration to me, and I would not want to be a part of taking that away from the people of Appalachia.

Throughout my year as farm manager with fellow manager Randy Wenker, I spent many hours visiting at the



Vanceburg Health Care Center, at centers for mentally retarded and emotionally disturbed adults, and with families throughout Lewis County. I developed many very special relationships with various people.

Iva Lou Highfield, a resident of the health-care center became one of my closest friends. She had been a live-in helper for an elderly woman for several years before coming to the nursing home. She had cooked, cleaned, tended the garden and a few animals, until, at 85-years-old, she broke her leg.

After recovering, she still wanted to help others, so the staff at the nursing home placed her in a room with an older woman who needed help getting around. Mrs. Highfield roomed with her for several years, until shortly after I arrived, when the woman's needs exceeded Iva's own strength.

I really enjoyed talking to Iva Lou, hearing about her youth outside of Rectorville. She always wanted to know what was happening at "the Barn." (Her hearing wasn't very good.) She was always amazed at my ability to be so far from my family, so she offered to be my local family. "Why don't you call me Grandma?" she asked.

From then on, that was her name. She introduced me to all of her friends at the nursing home, and told me about those who were not her friends as well. It was a joy to allow Grandma Iva Lou to look out for me, as she had looked out for so many before me. It also made me a little less homesick for the family, including a grand-

mother, I had left. Although we did as farm manager and college volunteer projects, we were the community.

As each of the year, Randy and I would go to the nursing home to help get around. Mrs. Highfield roomed with her for several years, until shortly after I arrived, when the woman's needs exceeded Iva's own strength.

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## The many faces of Glenmary Home Missions

Missioners in Vanceburg, Ky., (above) learn the ins and outs of fiddle playing; a summer helper (left) working in a Vanceburg nursing home.