

MAKING SHADE FOR OTHERS: THE SERVICE OF DR. CHARLES GUTHRIE

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Charles Guthrie

The office door in Good Hall, papered with the usual academic graffiti of pictures and pithy comments, appears similar to many located in the same hallway. Yet this office door reveals much about Dr. Charles (Charlie) Guthrie as a professor passionately devoted to service, an impulse that comes naturally to him.

One quotation, printed in italic script over a graphic representation of a leafy, green tree, reads “True service is the planting of a tree under whose shade you know you will never sit.” Charlie Guthrie’s sense of service as a vocation embodies just such an approach to teaching and serving others.

Guthrie, raised in the 1950s and early 1960s in a small community of the rural South, identifies service to others as a basic expectation woven into the social fabric. This expectation acquired more immediacy during his undergraduate years at Emory University. Guthrie's experience in mid-1960s Atlanta impressed upon him that "there was a lot to do, particularly in the inner cities."

After graduation, prompted by this recognition of need, Guthrie enrolled in a master's degree program at Columbia University, through which students returned two years of service to an East African country, living and teaching in Tanzania for two years and Uganda for an additional year. At the conclusion of the program, Guthrie had earned an MEd from Makerere University, Uganda, but more significantly, his approach to vocation and service had become utterly transformed.

Brian Mahan, in *Forgetting Ourselves on Purpose*, asserts that our understanding and pursuit of vocation is less a matter of intention, preparation, and occupation—the elements of an envisioned self—and more a question of our openness to follow our preoccupations. "We can leave our work at the office, but our preoccupations ride home with us. They sleep with us too and they dream with us."¹ Such preoccupations, when pursued, may coalesce into a vocation, a sense of life purpose that "speaks of a gracious discovery of a kind of interior consonance between our deepest desires and hopes and our unique gifts, as they are summoned forth by the needs of others and realized in response to that summons."²

Guthrie notes that his experience in Africa affirmed just such a larger sense of vocation. "I had no intention of teaching," Guthrie observes. "I didn't know what I wanted to do. That's why I went to Africa in the first place. I couldn't even find Africa on a map at that time. They didn't teach



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courses on Africa when I went through school, but I wanted to serve and experience an exciting adventure."

While journeying through this adventure, Guthrie developed what would become a lifelong interest in African society, culture, life, and history—an interest that would lead him back to Africa for his doctoral work, and an interest that would spark the surprising revelation of his vocation as a teacher.

When Charlie Guthrie talks about teaching and service, he can't help but be passionate. "What I like best about teaching is making a breakthrough with a student, not anything dramatic, just when they 'get' it, when I see a measure of engagement with what I'm trying to do in the teaching context. Teaching is a very clear vocation for me. Everything I do has a component of teaching. I'm clearly a teacher."

This love of teaching meshes quite naturally with his desire to serve others in the developing world. As Guthrie observes, "If you have a career in the developing world, it's pretty hard not to be service-oriented. At the very least, it's hard not to be sensitive to the needs of others."

Indeed, one of the most valuable reasons for engaging in service to others, in his view, is the recognition that one may owe something to others, or that one may not quite understand something about oneself. One must enter into service with openness and vulnerability. Searching for meaning

and opportunities for service without such openness can border on arrogance and insensitivity, because in such instances, one's own intention and agenda limit one's vision.

In short, though Guthrie resists pat definitions, he defines service as "an awareness and then the willingness to act upon that awareness. One can't happen without the other, though there's a complex mechanism at work here."

Such a fundamental process of recognition and response mirrors that recalled by Dorothy Day, cofounder of the Catholic Worker Movement, who, as a child, experienced the revelation that she was so fortunate as to have a doughnut, while other children weren't as fortunate: "I just remember holding that doughnut up [to my mother] and hoping she'd take it and give it to some child. I just kept talking about God and Jesus and feeding the hungry with doughnuts."³

Guthrie's professional life revolves around just this kind of process. As he notes, "The things I do are closely connected with service. I spend a large portion of my time thinking about and teaching about what needs are there in the world in relation to the rest of us. It is putting 'feet' on these needs that is important to me."



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The opportunity to teach about such needs led him to Indiana Central University in 1981. After receiving his PhD in African Studies at Indiana University and working for three years in an academic appointment at the University of Florida, Guthrie came to the attention of Dr. Fred Hill, then chair of the ICU History Department, who was searching for a colleague to teach about Third World cultures and develop an international studies program.

Guthrie knew of Indiana Central's reputation as a teaching institution, but he thought at the outset of his appointment that he would not stay because he "was not a city person. I grew up in the mountains, and there are no mountains around here." Yet the lack of state university bureaucracy, the personal warmth of colleagues, and the professional flexibility to develop programs, organize and conduct workshops and conferences, and teach in a broad range of topic areas won him over.

"Education for service"—Guthrie read and countenanced the institutional motto, but, in his words, it was the "putting" rather than the "saying" that became most important. At Indiana Central, he found a number of service-oriented, altruistic people who, in their personal and professional lives, quietly lived the model of service. The old EUB habit of keeping the story rather than telling the story is witnessed in the innumerable acts of service among faculty and staff, Guthrie notes—acts that are not registered anywhere.

In those days, he remembers, service functioned as a common focus for conversation and work. There were shared expectations about the world and society, and, more particularly, about the academic mission of the University—expectations located in the faith-based influences and humanistic impulses present on campus.

Within a year of his arrival at ICU, Guthrie, now coordinator of International Programs, found himself planning his first service project—and the first overseas student project in the University's history—to Azpitia, Peru. South America served as the secondary disciplinary focus for Guthrie, who persuaded Chaplain David Owen to join the group on the church construction/medical project.

"The whole approach to the development of international programs," Guthrie observed, "was 'build it and they will come.' When Fred Hill handed the program over to me, that's exactly what I tried to do. At this point, service was just emerging in the field of higher education as a study focus, not as a part of the curriculum, but as an expectation."

Students interested in international service received the "Passport to International Programs," a small booklet describing the course and travel offerings available in any given year. This publication included comments from students in the Peru project about the transformative possibilities of international service.

Following the Peru project came two trips to Sierra Leone. In 1986, a group traveled to Bo to construct a school, and in 1989, another group returned to Freetown, accompanied by a medical team, to provide clinical services and build a church. These and subsequent trips were codirected by Guthrie and the Rev. John Young, the University chaplain for many years (see photo top left).

From the beginning, Guthrie and others envisioned these trips as experiential and transformative for those who served as well as for those who received the service. They intentionally sought the involvement of the community, the United Methodist Church, and interested faculty along the way.



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After the Peru trip, an article detailing its scope and purpose appeared in the University's magazine. This article sparked faculty and student interest in travel experiences containing a service component. Guthrie called faculty colleagues, urging them to develop such international opportunities, with the aim of providing as wide an array of travel/service experiences as possible.

For all the overseas service opportunities Guthrie sponsors, students who wish to participate are screened for an openness to others and a willingness to learn. Thus, he tends to "prefer a definition of service that includes an educational component. If one doesn't learn something out of the experience," he "question[s] the motives for service."

Four house construction trips in conjunction with Habitat for Humanity—to Bluefields and Pearl Lagoon, Nicaragua, in 1991; Cuzco, Peru, in 1996; Ichilo and Santa Fe, Bolivia, in 1999; and Jacaltenango, Guatemala in 2003—succeeded the trips to Sierra Leone.

Guthrie observes that, for a variety of complicated reasons, people who are interested in service and try to make it work in an academic setting end up looking at ways to institutionalize it, a "damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't" impulse. While such a view springs from the sixties generation's discovery of the rest of the world through institutions such as the Peace Corps and civil rights initiatives, such an impulse contains a counterproductive aspect for Guthrie.

In his view, in the early years of his tenure when Indiana Central was a small-sized university, "service had not yet been institutionalized and was an integral part of the community atmosphere. The University is different now than it was a number of years ago. For the last few years, we have

been wrapped up in trying to count up and figure percentages of service activity. And so, although the commitment to service continues, we have diminished the spontaneity of service."

It is this spontaneity—that "doughnut" impulse to recognize and directly respond to need—that lives at the heart of service for Guthrie. He affirms that there are still many persons who engage in service projects for the "right" reasons. One of the most positive developments at the University is the Community Programs Center and the community outreach to Laurelwood and Fountain Square. These positive initiatives represent for him the University in the community, working with neighbors as a partner rather than as a directive source of expertise or an uncaring institution.

Indeed, the dynamics in academic institutions generally have changed over the last ten or fifteen years concerning recruitment, preparation, involvement, and motivation levels of students. The major shift that Guthrie observes concerns the increasing popularity of service as a component of a student's academic experience—and an accompanying lack of reflection on the part of some students concerning their motivations for service. Students tend to focus more on extrinsic (class credit or stipends) and intrinsic (feeling good) rewards, in his view, rather than focusing more intently on the condition of the "Other" in whose midst they serve.

Students in the programs Guthrie sponsors undergo reflective, mental, academic, and cultural preparation prior to departing for the international destination. Such preparation becomes crucial because of the risk of unintentionally offending or damaging those in the foreign culture.



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For Guthrie, reading widely about a culture is the best preparation, along with training oneself to see clearly what is important in the context through a less subjective lens. Service is not about "fixing things," and good intentions may not be adequate. The world is more complicated than many Americans conceive. A recognition of the real and perceived power differentials present in cultural exchange becomes imperative.

As Guthrie affirms, the best outcomes happen one-on-one in service and in teaching. "Education comes from the new stuff that happens outside and inside the individual in a kind of dialogue between knowledge acquisition and experience. This kind of experience is rich and priceless, and leads to an evolution of different types of questions to ask."

As a small card affixed in the corner of his office door proclaims, "You are fulfilling your significance when you convert all your experience to the highest advantage of others." Professor Charlie Guthrie does just that.

— "basin & towel" recognition 2004

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- A (p. 100) Photograph of Rev. John Young and other members of the team that Charles Guthrie led on work project to Guatemala in 2003. Personal photograph provided by Charles Guthrie used with his permission.
- B (p. 101) Dr. Charles Guthrie. University photograph used courtesy of the Publications office at the University of Indianapolis.
- C (p. 101) Photograph of Charles Guthrie (with masonry trowel) working on wall in the village of Azpitia, Peru, in 1983. Personal photograph provided by Charles Guthrie used with his permission.
- D (p. 102) Photograph of Rev. John Guthrie and Charles Guthrie during trip to Guatemala in 2003. Personal photograph provided by Charles Guthrie used with his permission.
- E (p. 102) Work site in Azipitia, Peru (1983). Personal photograph provided by Charles Guthrie used with his permission.
- F (p. 103) The ruins of the ancient city of Macchu Pichu in Peru—one of the sites visited by the 1983 travel-study seminar led by Dr. Guthrie. Personal photograph provided by Charles Guthrie used with his permission.