

## WITH SERVANT'S HANDS

A. James Fuller & Rebecca Blair '80



## *Don Hilton '54*

“Are our human hands being used gently for serving and the health, comfort, uplifting, deliverance, blessing and miracles needed by others?” Don Hilton, who has worked as a teacher and missionary in a life of Christian service, poses this question for our reflection. Confident that his efforts are made in Christ’s name, Hilton believes that his hands are “the very hands of Christ on the earth.” He sees himself as God’s instrument, a person through whom Jesus can work to reach others. As a missionary educator, Don Hilton has fulfilled his calling by reaching out to his students and the community with the “hands of Jesus.” And those hands are “servant hands, for He came not to be served, but to serve.”

The youngest of the three Hilton brothers, Don was born in 1932 in Plymouth, Wisconsin. His father, an Evangelical United Brethren minister, served parishes in Wisconsin, Ohio, and Minnesota. Like his older brothers, Don was heavily influenced by his parents, especially his father. He observed firsthand how his parents poured their lives into the ministry and “sought the Lord.” Furthermore, as the youngest son, Don’s brothers, especially Bruce, influenced him. According to Don, his oldest sibling served as the leader of the trio by force of intellect and personality as well as by age. When it came time for Don to choose a college, he followed his brothers to Indiana Central College in Indianapolis.

Just like his brothers, Don found the transition to college life an easy one and felt comfortable in the familial atmosphere on campus. He remembers his time at the school fondly and credits the college with providing him with a strong “spiritual and moral training.” He noticed the motto, “Education for Service,” right away and recalls that it “grabbed [him]” and had a lasting effect. As he recalls, the motto “reinforced what I had learned at home” and made it clear that “this is what you are here for.” Hilton believed that he was “here to glorify God” in service that extended from his faith. Life at the college offered a demonstration of service to the young scholar, as he observed both professors and students who lived out the motto of the institution in their daily lives. In the post-Depression era, he notes that the professors were “suffering financially, but they poured themselves into service.”

Another important area in which the school helped him concerned his shy personality. Even as a young man, Don learned that “God pushes us into things,” a process made evident in the way that college life forced him into situations that helped him overcome his timidity. Public speaking and discussion requirements in class forced him to confront his shyness and helped him master it, an invaluable accomplishment for a student planning to be a teacher. Hilton ultimately defeated his reticence when being put in front of the classroom left him no choice.

He graduated from college in 1954, just in time to be drafted into military service. He served for two years in the Army, working as a paymaster in a small unit based in Germany. Hilton’s military service became a testing ground for his morality, as so many soldiers spent time drinking and womanizing. But his faith held true, as his strong moral background made it easier for him to overcome temptations. Being in the military also afforded him an opportunity to travel, so Hilton journeyed all over Europe. He perceived life in the Army as a chance to serve. During Hilton’s enlistment, the soldiers comprised part of a force stationed on the front of the Cold War with the Soviet Union. He viewed his task as helping to detain Communism and defend democratic freedom. In addition to these military aspects of his service, being in the Army allowed him to witness to others about his faith. By his constancy of living the Christian life daily, his military companions were reminded of their need for Christ as well.

During his active Army service, Hilton also became engaged to Mary Huston, a young woman he had met at Indiana Central. Like both of his brothers, he became a “Graduate of the Heart” when he was discharged from the Army, marrying his fiancée upon his return to the United States. At first, the newlyweds lived in Indianapolis where Don took graduate classes in history at Butler University. But in 1957, he accepted a position as a teacher in Denver, Colorado. The job came about somewhat unexpectedly during a time when it seemed that another such position would not be forthcoming right away. The circumstances of the offer helped confirm his calling in Hilton’s mind; he was sure that God’s hand was in it. Today, he still looks back on that unexpected job offer as a reminder to “Trust the Lord.” He points back to his senior year in high school, when he observed a talented teacher, experiencing a strong sense that this vocation would form his life’s work. As a result, he had pursued a degree in education at Indiana Central. With the Colorado job in hand, he was now ready to take up his career.



Hilton taught junior high math for seven years in a Denver public school with a burgeoning population of students. Though he started teaching in a brand new school, it soon reached capacity, requiring the teaching staff to offer double sessions to accommodate student educational need. Hilton observes that he enjoyed teaching. Moreover, he and Mary were settling into their lives in the community. They had started a family, and now had two sons (a third would come a few years later). With a steady income and a growing family, they had purchased a new house, and the future seemed clear. But God had other plans. A fellow teacher passed on a leaflet about a USAID program called Teachers for East Africa, a program that sent educators to African countries for two years. The leaflet advertised the need for teachers in Kenya. Hilton immediately felt a strong pull to join the program, but with life progressing so well in Denver, he wasn’t sure what to do. He was convinced that it would be too difficult and that Mary wouldn’t want to move the family to another country. The boys were only 2 ½ and 4-years-old at the time. Still, he took the paper home, laid it on the table, and left it there. Mary found it, read it, and came to her husband, explaining to him that she thought they should go!



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Without having discussed it together, the couple had each come to the same conclusion. This convinced them that going to Kenya was the Lord's will. So they went.

In Kakamega, Kenya, Don taught high school math in a public school from 1964-1966. The Hiltons found the experience a rewarding and easy adventure. They had a car, their housing was provided, and the school was located in the high plateau lands where there was a healthier climate and more beautiful landscape than one might find elsewhere. They toured East Africa, meeting people from many different countries. The Peace Corps was just starting at that time, so they had the opportunity to meet some of the volunteers working under the new program as well. The school in Kakamega operated under the British plan, which included chapel meetings. This aspect enabled Don to carry on a Christian witness through regular participation in chapel. These two years in Kenya only whetted their appetites for missions, which led to their next "assignment."

Upon their return to the United States, Don took a job as a science and math teacher at the McCurdy School in Española, New Mexico. Part of a missionary effort of the United Brethren and later the Evangelical United Brethren Church, the school would continue under the United Methodist banner following the 1968 merger. The complex at McCurdy included a hospital and school. Indeed, Española, had long served as an

important service destination for Indiana Central students, whether they went west to work for a summer or took up a career there. Mary Huston Hilton had worked for Dr. Roy Turley at the Española hospital for a summer while at Indiana Central, and the couple had also visited the mission. Hilton wrote to Dale Robinson, who had recently been appointed as superintendent of the school, to inquire about a position, but there were no openings. So Don and Mary readied themselves to take up educational service positions in Kentucky. At the last minute, they received a letter from Robinson announcing that there was an opening after all. Was God testing their obedience?

From 1966 to 1989, Don Hilton taught at the McCurdy School. The school served an impoverished rural population, including a large number of Native Americans and Hispanics, as well as many Anglo-American families. In addition to education, the teachers and staff offered Christ to the community. Hilton often witnessed to his faith, helping some individuals to convert. The Hiltons bought a home in Española and threw themselves into the mission work and the community. But after twenty-three years there, Don began to sense that it was time for something else. Though no outward signs of trouble, no great crises, no clear signs emerged, as Hilton explains it, "God has a way of making you uncomfortable in a place." He began to feel that God wanted him to move on.

Don Hilton believed that the Lord wanted him to go back to foreign missions through the Christ for the Nations Institute in Dallas, Texas. This training program provided studies in Bible, ministry, and mission work, offering a useful opportunity to find a place as a missionary. But Hilton felt that the move to Dallas would be irrevocably stymied by his lean finances. He and Mary realized that, after thirty-four years of marriage, they had thirty-five dollars in the bank! After all, missionary work meant that financial troubles were a way of life. Still, the CFNI training was expensive and would require a couple of years or more. That meant a lot of money—money that the Hiltons did not have. How could they fulfill the sure understanding that God was calling them to Dallas? Then, they realized that they owned a valuable asset: their home on one acre of irrigated land. They had purchased the house in 1968 for \$17,000. Over their twenty-three years in New Mexico, its value had significantly increased. So, they put the house up for sale as a way to pay for their trip and time in Dallas. It sold for \$110,000, financing their two-and-a-half year stay at CFNI, as well as four self-supported years overseas.

While in Dallas, Hilton experienced another calling, this time to Russia and Estonia. In 1992, the Hiltons moved to Moscow as part of a program called "Schools of Tomorrow." These schools are Christian, English-language institutions designed to offer Christian classes in public schools. The



schools started with first grade and today offer programming for grades 1-11. Don and Mary were instrumental in establishing the Christian educational programs for grades 1-4 in two public schools in Sillamäe, Estonia. The move to Moscow brought a big change for the Hiltons. For them, Russia and Estonia seemed more like Third World countries than Kenya had been so many years before! They did not have a car and the physical conditions were difficult. They had to learn how to get food, which meant standing in lines and knowing which store to go to on which day to get which kind of food. The parents of students proved helpful, often standing in line for the Hiltons. In addition to setting up the School of Tomorrow and teaching, Don and Mary held Bible studies in their home three nights a week. This more personal contact led to a number of conversions and the formation of a dedicated community of Christian adherents. In this way, they were able to see the fruits of their labor in the community as well as the classroom.

After nearly five years in Russia, the Hiltons returned to the United States. When they left, the two Schools of Tomorrow in Russian and Estonia were successfully operating programs for grades 1-4. A number of Russian and Estonian teachers had become Christians and were supporting the program. The Hiltons located in Hereford, Texas, to live near one of their sons. Don Hilton found a job there teaching fourth grade at the Nazarene Christian Academy. In 1999, he retired from teaching, although

he is currently writing a curriculum for a Discipleship Class for the Church of the Nazarene, as well as a twelve-session adult class on scientific creation. And in retirement, he has found yet another mission field: the Internet. Don had started writing while in Española, composing a weekly column for a local paper. Now, he has resumed writing a similar column on the Internet, designing and maintaining the Good News Daily Web site [www.goodnewsdaily.org](http://www.goodnewsdaily.org). This site features Don's columns on various issues, including many of his pieces published in New Mexico.

There one will find his column of December 1, 1999. Titled "Jesus' Hands," the article encapsulates Don Hilton's vision of service as being God's instrument on earth. When asked to define service, he replies that, "service is doing something for others to make the world a better place within the context of God's plan." He also thinks that service includes "being motivated by a design" to help others. For him, it is "obedience to God" and is something that "pleases God." Ultimately, the missionary teacher thinks that service is "doing what God wants us to do." Indeed, he believes that "helping others is a means of glorifying the Creator."

Hilton says a great deal of satisfaction comes from the "permanent positives" that the Russian-Estonians with whom he worked acquired during his four years there. At the time he left that former Soviet republic, 190 students were studying all

their subjects in English as well as Russian. Even more satisfying is that nearly all those students had obtained the spiritual foundations of accepting Christ as well as having a rudimentary knowledge of the Bible.

Don recalls: "An indelible memory remains with me of conversing with fourth graders completely in English. This in addition to the spiritual growth of students and teachers, made it all worthwhile in spite of the hardships."

His view of education today also shares in this vision. He advises today's students to remember that, "education is not the goal," but is "simply a means to a goal." He urges them to "put things into perspective" and keep their priorities straight. Hilton hopes that students will continually ask themselves, "What am I here for?" He also urges young people to realize that "God has given us a lot," but that He also "requires a lot." When it comes to a life of service, he encourages students to remember that the "best way to change things is one individual at a time through Christ." Realizing that many of today's students at the University of Indianapolis may not be Christians or might be struggling with their faith, he hopes that they will "compare religions and traditions and see what is best." Specifically, he advises them to "compare true believers of each and see how they practice." In the end, Don Hilton is confident that his Christian faith will win out. And it will give rise to another generation of servants who will go out and help others with the servant hands of Jesus.

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- B (p. 31) Don Hilton (January 2001). Personal photo used with permission of Don Hilton.
- C p. 32) Bruce and Don Hilton from *The Oracle* yearbook (1954); Photograph used with permission of the Frederick D. Hill Archives, University of Indianapolis.
- D (p. 32) Don Hilton with the “School of Tomorrow” Teachers in School #5 in Estonia (1996). Teachers from left: Nina, Yelena, Olga, Tatyana, Irina, and Nadya. Seated: Sergei. Personal photo used with permission of Don Hilton.
- E (p. 33) First Grade Classroom in Sillamae Estonia where Mary Hilton supervised “School of Tomorrow” Christian/English language program, based in Louisville, Texas (1992–1993). Personal photo used with permission of Don Hilton.
- F (p. 33) Don and Mary Hilton. Photograph by Olan Mills studios, used with permission of the photographer and Don Hilton.