Life together: A passion for reconciliation

by Jason Byassee in the March 8, 2005 issue

Racial reconciliation has been the central theme of Chris Rice's life and ministry. It is also the subject of his two books. More Than Equals *(InterVarsity, 1993) was coauthored by his friend Spencer Perkins, a fellow member of Voice of Calvary Church in Jackson, Mississippi, and the son of the civil rights leader John Perkins, founder of Voice of Calvary. In the memoir* Grace Matters *(Jossey-Bass, 2002), Rice describes life in the intentional Christian community called Antioch that he and Spencer Perkins helped found and lead. Both books describe Rice's transformation from a naïve white "do-gooder" to a person who lives and teaches the message of reconciliation.*

After Spencer Perkins's death at age 44 in 1998, Rice left Mississippi to study at Duke Divinity School. In 2004 he led a study group on reconciliation for the Lausanne Forum on World Evangelization, which met in Thailand (see the group's paper, "Reconciliation as the Mission of God," at www.reconciliationnetwork.com). His next assignment is to help establish a center for reconciliation at Duke.

I spoke with him about what he has learned about race and the church, and about the church's mission in reconciliation.

Is it possible to sum up what you've learned from 17 years at Voice of Calvary Church and 12 years of living in an intentional, multiracial Christian community?

I learned there that the way things are is not the way things have to be. In Jackson, Mississippi, a new community was birthed in a broken inner-city neighborhood. Blacks and whites came to be close friends. Our children grew up together, we worshiped together. We showed that over time substantial reconciliation can happen.

I also learned to keep hope small. Black and white people eating together, leaving their isolated worlds and coming together in mission—this is a small sign of hope.

What would you say to someone who thinks there's not much more work to be done in racial reconciliation?

The heart of the gospel is becoming a new community. The Holy Spirit's interruption of this world at Pentecost with a new community of Jews and gentiles, privileged and marginalized, is not realized in the church in the U.S. Ninety percent of African-American Christians worship in all-black churches. Ninety percent of white American Christians worship in all-white churches. Thirty years since the incredible victories of the civil rights movement, we continue to live in the trajectory of racial fragmentation. The biggest problem is that we don't see that as a problem.

For example, the mostly white Presbyterian church of which I am a member has a hundred-year history. Three blocks away from our church in Durham is an African-American church that also has a hundred-year history. For a century these two churches have existed three blocks apart but have not prayed together, read scripture together, celebrated communion together, or joined in common mission. We are doing some small things to change this, but basically Christians don't even ask what it means for us to be members of the one body of Christ in this city.

That's the challenge of this new era—to realize a common life. That wasn't possible during segregation—you would get killed for even praying together then. That doesn't happen now, but we still don't pray together.

I was struck by Spencer Perkins's comment, which appears in *More Than Equals,* that he wouldn't have bothered with racial reconciliation if he weren't a Christian.

Spencer was willing to speak the truth no matter where it led him—even if it led him to self-criticism or to criticism of fellow African Americans. He would say that black people aren't any more interested in reconciliation than white people.

Martin Luther King Jr. taught us that the oppressed may have to initiate reconciliation. The categories of "oppressed" and "oppressor" are problematic for Christians because we're all called to work for reconciliation. We're all called to become faithful whether it "works" or not. That's a hard message, but I think it is at the heart of what it means to be Christian.

In your books you tell of traveling with Spencer, and how, as you talked and laughed together in public, you would draw stares. You imagined people wondering if you two were musicians, or athletes, or gays. Those groups do a better job of bridging racial lines than the church does.

So does the military—that's the most integrated institution in America. Not the church. No one would think that maybe we were together because we were Christians.

When Spencer and I would go out to speak and stand side by side in front of an audience, we felt like half of our work had already been accomplished.

But it was far from easy. We were together only through years of blood, sweat and tears. But we were together, and that was our message.

How did the Antioch intentional community get started?

In 1983 many of us white members of Voice of Calvary thought things were going quite well in our church, but the African Americans believed there was racism in our midst and organized meetings to address it. There were many confrontations and many people left the church. It was a very painful time.

A group of whites and blacks from among those who stayed began to meet together. We'd survived this crisis, so we pledged to stay together and see where we were led. We started by studying the Sermon on the Mount and asking, "What does it really mean to live this out as a group of friends?" After two years of meetings we decided that we were being called into an even deeper commitment of friendship and mission.

We left our individual homes and bought a six-acre property with an old farmhouse. Twelve of us renovated it, moved in together and called ourselves the Antioch Community, thinking of the first Christian church in Acts 17 that shared life across lines of Jew and gentile.

We shared a common life for the next 12 years. We had one refrigerator and one telephone line. We had a common checkbook and all of our salaries went into a common purse. We ate dinner together every night. We had a ministry of hospitality to neighbors and to men just out of prison. A single mother lived with us during her pregnancy and when she gave birth. We had a saying that there was always room

for one more at our table. Those were rich years.

It's clear from your account in *Grace Matters* that the relationships were intricate and difficult.

Our life was intense. But it was even more marked by hope. Our black members were much better at this. They taught us whites not to be too serious. Eating good ribs together was just as important for Antioch as preaching racial reconciliation. Lingering over meals together and wrestling with the children on the living room floor were crucial. Then when crises did occur, we were close enough to forgive each other.

The combination of intensity and hope was even stronger in my relationship with Spencer. He and I were very different people. We got on each other's nerves. There were often ego issues. I learned from Spencer that I really am a sinner—that's not just a theory. I saw my dark side, my desire for power and control, my jealousy.

Can you say more about what you learned from your friendship and ministry with Spencer Perkins?

I learned the power of forgiveness. Spencer was raised in a segregated town in Mississippi. He and his parents decided he would integrate an all-white school. He suffered intense humiliation there for two years. His father was nearly beaten to death for his civil rights work. And yet after these experiences of pain, Spencer was in a church with white people like me.

He also had incredible love for outlaws—guys who we knew were dealing drugs, troublemakers. He would continue to embrace them when other people would write them off. He taught me about the priority of relationship—of taking time for people.

At the Lausanne meeting in Thailand, a small conflict arose within the group, and I responded in such a way that one of the African members commented, "Chris thinks like an African, Chris is a relational person." At that moment I thought: there's a lot of Spencer in me.

In *More Than Equals* you note that some whites say they would like to move into predominantly black areas, but are reluctant because they worry about their children's safety. And you mention that your missionary parents took their children to Korea when it wasn't so safe or comfortable,

and you say that that example was actually a greater gift than safety.

My parents went against the grain by living not on a missionary compound, but in Korean neighborhoods. They developed deep friendships with Koreans. They learned the language. There was no separation between home and ministry. When the military dictatorship cracked down in South Korea and the human rights movement heated up in the 1970s, my parents took up the cause of the Korean struggle for justice. My parents made it easy for me to go to Mississippi.

You write that it is not that God is using the church to heal the racial divide in America, but that God is using race to heal the church. Have you seen evidence of this movement in your international experience too?

When you bring 50 church leaders from around the world into a room for a week, it can be heaven or it can be hell. At the Lausanne meeting in Thailand, we had Palestinian Christians and Messianic Jews from Israel in our midst. We had Hutus and Tutsis from Rwanda. It was potentially very volatile. But it turned out to be an incredible journey.

We focused a lot on Rwanda and its 1994 genocide. Rwanda was considered one of the most evangelized countries in Africa up until the genocide. Our group journeyed together to Rwanda. We visited the genocide memorial in Kigali where 250,000 victims are buried under a huge concrete slab. They were killed in just over 100 days. We visited a village where 10,000 people were slaughtered inside a church where they had fled for refuge. That’s three 9/11s inside one church. This was Christians killing Christians. What does this say about a kind of Christianity that is growing in the world?

Our group adopted a covenant pledging ourselves to continue our friendship and to pray for one another. We also plan to launch a global reconciliation network. Our sense in Thailand was that God is willing something into existence, and we shouldn’t name it too quickly.

Our group was one of 30 that made presentations to the entire forum. We feared that these five-minute presentations were going to get dull, so instead of talking we grouped 12 of our number on the stage. A Hutu and a Tutsi from Rwanda were standing together. So were a Catholic priest, a Protestant clergywoman and an Orthodox priest. A Messianic Jew from Israel and a Palestinian Christian were sitting together. In the next group were an African American, an Asian American and myself

as a white American. And finally a man and a woman.

As our narrators told the story of what we did in our group, we pulled out basins, towels and jars of water and washed one another's feet. As we were leaving the stage I could hear thunderous applause. Fifteen hundred people were on their feet, applauding. Many wept. My hope is that they would see in our message God's desire for the entire church.

Your group featured mainline and evangelical Protestant leaders, and also Catholic and Orthodox. Is this the future of ecumenism?

I hope so. Our group was weary of such distinctions as "evangelical" versus "ecumenical." These two emphases cannot be separated. An evangelical member of our leadership team from Burundi said while we were in Rwanda, "This is the first time I've ever talked to a Catholic brother in Christ." He and Emmanuel Katongole, a Ugandan Catholic theologian at Duke, have become friends. After a prayer at the Thailand meeting a Pentecostal pastor from Serbia told me it was the first time he had heard of an Orthodox priest blessing something an evangelical was involved with. He said, "Serbian Orthodox and Pentecostals are bitterly divided. But because our hands were grasped together, I felt for the first time an Orthodox priest was also blessing me."

Many people are tired of the divides between "reconciliation" and "justice," between "personal salvation" and "social gospel." I did see a deep yearning for new possibilities.

How was your vision of a seamless unity between racial reconciliation and evangelism received at the Lausanne Forum?

I see the dangers of triumphalism in some evangelical approaches to mission—as though somehow if we could get a film about Jesus into every village on earth, the world would be saved. Evangelicalism can be marked by excessive certainty and insufficient self-criticism. But evangelicals breathe vitality and energy. Theirs is the kind of Christianity that is growing in the world, especially in Africa and Asia.

The mainline ecumenical movement, on the other hand, is in danger of surrendering the uniqueness of Christ, of trying to be all things to all people so that Christ no longer matters as the Son of God raised from the dead. For evangelicals, the danger is that of making Christ too divine; for mainliners, it's that of making Christ too

human. Both lose the fullness of the Christ of Chalcedon.

Do you have hope that local communities can emulate the sense of mission that your group in Thailand found?

This movement isn't so much about new organizations. It's about building community that is concrete and visible. It's about local churches learning to eat together, to grow in relationship, to become friends in mission and pursuing a just community. That's where the hope is. That's how to begin.

We're called to deal with a daily, ordinary mess. I wouldn't want to rush in with grand strategies for changing the world. Locality matters. We need people to look around to see where the boundaries are that have become normalized and then to be willing to cross those boundaries to live a common life.

For me the mission is never far removed from the Antioch community's dinner table. It's never far removed from welcoming Cecil, a southern "redneck" inmate who lived with us for a year. It's never far removed from hospitality, because that's what we're created for as human beings. We're created for life in the body, for eating together, for friendship, for intimacy.

I have a passion for reconciliation—not for abstract reasons, but because of specific friends from Antioch like Gloria, Lue and Kortney, whom I love. They matter to me. That's why I want to make reconciliation happen—because I want to share life with them.