

Goodbye *to* GOD

A story of really radical love

by Jo Schloeder

“Sunday night I was on my way to kill myself. Actually, I stopped here just to say goodbye to God.”

That’s what Bill Wegner heard from a young woman on the last night of one of his many missions. “But I came in and sat in the back that night. God used you to save my life. Thank you,” she said.

Although Wegner has many memories of his years delivering Catholic missions around the world, he recalled this one with an awe – a wonderment – of how truly awesome God’s love is.

Bill stopped thoughtfully and said, “When I think about not doing this, I think about her.”

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That was four years ago and Wegner is still traversing the continents bringing the message of God’s radical love to Catholic parishes and dioceses around the world as part of Good News International Ministries.

Good News is a group of former business executives who have tossed the whole corporate lifestyle, with all its perks and benefits, to teach their peers about God’s unconditional affection. They have given up careers, businesses, assets, possessions and comfortable lifestyles all in the name of teaching this “God” type of love.

“What we do is relevant,” said Wegner, who is director of Good News Ministries of New Jersey, International. “In the Bible, Jesus called us to be holy and in our missions we talk about what that means. It doesn’t necessarily mean that we pray more or go to church more. But we hear His gospel, take it to our head and heart and live it,” he added.

He said, “We teach people to love their enemies and do good in the face of evil and bless those who curse you.”

Sounds like a tall order? Perhaps. But, to Wegner it has become a way of life.

“In my missions, I talk about forgiveness and some of the things that have happened to me and how I have had to come to forgive my enemies,” he said.

After one of those talks, an older couple approached him and said, “We want you to know that your talk on forgiveness really touched our hearts. Three years ago, in front of her two teenagers, our daughter was murdered by the man she was dating. He is in prison now.”

“Because of your talk,” they went on, “we are going to the prison next week to tell this man that we forgive him for killing our daughter.”

Wegner thought about it for a minute, and with true admiration in his voice he said, “That’s God stuff. Only God could give people that freedom.”

“Now they are free. Every time that they had to see him, thought about him... all the feelings that must have come back, feelings of revenge, hatred, fear... they are free from them now. They were smiling... glowing actually,” he said.

AT THE TOP OF HIS GAME

From his small basement office in the parish center of St. Veronica’s Church, Howell, NJ, Wegner has positively affected thousands and thousands of lives around the globe. Yet, you almost have to twist his arm to hear his stories. Truly a humble servant, Wegner lives by the Word...and in this case it’s straight out of Matthew 6: “When you do good deeds, don’t try to show off. If you do you won’t get a reward from your Father in heaven.”

A former teacher turned hotel manager turned entrepreneur millionaire, Bill Wegner did it all. He owned a national real-estate company, an insurance agency, a travel agency, he built houses and developed land. He taught school, managed a luxury hotel, and in his spare time he served the public as an elected official in his hometown of Howell, NJ. He was truly on top of his game.

Although he was born and raised Catholic, Wegner admits that he didn’t go to church for over 20 years after moving out of his parent’s home. Instead, he experienced the 60’s, experimented in alternative lifestyles and eventually got involved in illegal gambling.

But, God had bigger plans for Bill Wegner and opened other, safer opportunities in his life. Good thing, since one of his “partners” died in jail serving a life sentence.

In 1994, after a series of financial disasters and bad business decisions, however, Wegner was desperate for peace. In his desperation, he picked up his wife’s Bible... and God came knocking on Bill Wegner’s door with true, unconditional love. And Bill answered. He gave up the corporate rat race, downsized life, sold his businesses and began devoting all of his time to sharing the message of Jesus’ divine love and how it can turn even the most desperate of lives (like his own) around.

PEOPLE ARE DISTRACTED

Wegner explained that it is so easy for people to be distracted today, yet they need look no further than Jesus Christ’s Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5, 6, 7) for guidance and a how-to for living a holy life. With down-to-earth lessons about love, peace, money, possessions, worry, anger, revenge, marriage and divorce, Christ gave us all the answers thousands of years ago for living a blessed, fulfilled and peaceful life today.

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“We are a back-to-basics ministry taking the Gospel message of Jesus Christ to people and *living it*. With all the distractions in the world today, people are getting away from the simple message that Christ taught,” said Wegner.

Good News conducts services in Catholic parishes and dioceses around the world. Wegner has spoken all over the U.S., as well as in Ireland and Central America. He will go wherever he is requested, and often receives nothing in return – not even his travel expenses. His ministry (and his household) are kept financially afloat by the goodwill of others and donations from people who attend his missions. Yes, Bill Wegner is living on faith.

“We would love to bring the gifts of this ministry to the Catholic Church in every parish and diocese,” Wegner said. “It is our hope to be able to assist in having the precious people of every parish discover and rediscover the joys of living our faith and the treasures provided for them in the richness of our Catholic Church.”

But, it’s not always just Catholics who hear his message. Wegner preached a message of reconciliation and peace to both Catholics and Protestants in Belfast, Northern Ireland, at the time of the historic vote on the agreement to bring political peace to the tiny island. This was not the first time Wegner, who is half Irish, preached there. He has spoken in both the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland during six missions to the country.

UNIQUE TO THE CHURCH

Though not the only ministry in town, Good News is unique to the Catholic Church.

“For one thing, we go anywhere we’re called and often for free,” said Wegner.

The group is also unique in the fact that the six men who run Good News chapters full time have given up everything to work for the cause. Though Wegner often travels with Brent Huiser of the Raleigh/Durham ministry, there are four other men who minister full time and 40 part-time men and women.

What also sets them apart is their innovative methods and their creative approach to reaching Catholics around the country.

“We try to think out of the Catholic box in order to reach people,” he said. “Not everyone will come to a parish mission or a retreat or conference, but they may come to a concert or tent revival.”

Wegner has appeared on cable television and radio programs, sponsored concerts, conducted tent revivals, and held men and women’s rallies ... all in the name of evangelizing and bringing people closer to Jesus.

“We do these things so we can encourage people in other faiths,” he added.

Good News also conducts seminars, retreats and conferences centered on personal conversion, spiritual transformation and missionary outreach. They promote the formation of a deeper spirituality centered in prayer, the sacraments and the church community and encourage direct, personal involvement in the lives of the poor, sick, dying, homeless and incarcerated.

FALLEN AND BACK UP

Not trained clergy, theologians or Biblical scholars, Wegner and company are ordinary sinners who explain how to live a non-cluttered, simplified, holy life. But don't think he's not qualified to speak before thousands at mass. Wegner, who has a degree in education, taught school prior to his days as an entrepreneur. He also put three long years and over 300 hours into the process of learning about his faith, scriptures, the Catholic catechism and teachings of the Vatican in order to ensure that he would be more than just excited to share his testimony, but qualified.

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“We share our struggles and how we've fallen and gotten back up, and we do it with humor and down-to-earth stories. We uplift and encourage people on a peer-to-peer level.”

Wegner said that parishioners are often uplifted and encouraged by his stories. Though it's much of the same message they may hear from a priest or clergy member, hearing it from a layman makes it somehow different – perhaps more relevant.

“They see that we are indeed living on faith, sharing the Gospel and not paid to say this.”

“Everybody is struggling to become somebody in our performance-oriented society,” he concluded. “We need to recognize that we are already somebody; not by anything we have done or will do, but by what our Lord Jesus Himself has already done for us by His passion, death and resurrection.”

“Until we fully comprehend how much God truly loves and forgives us, we cannot even begin to love ourselves or our neighbor as Jesus commands us to do.”

Good News Ministries of New Jersey International is part of a grassroots, nationwide Catholic lay ministry. For information about Good News Ministries or to invite them to your community, contact Bill Wegner at 1-800-430-0586 or email goodnews@cybercomm.net.

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