

October 1993

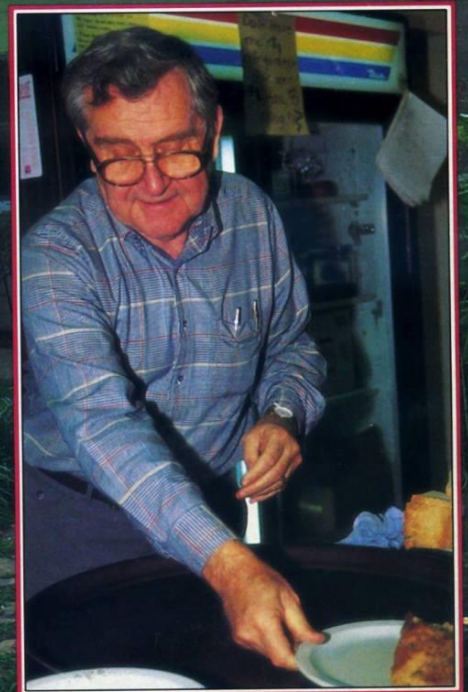
# Presbyterian Survey

THE MAGAZINE  
FOR PRESBYTERIANS

## “Mysterious Pilgrimage” IN ATLANTA

*A small congregation engages  
in ministry “beyond its means”*

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*What can we learn from  
the “mega churches”  
of our denomination?*

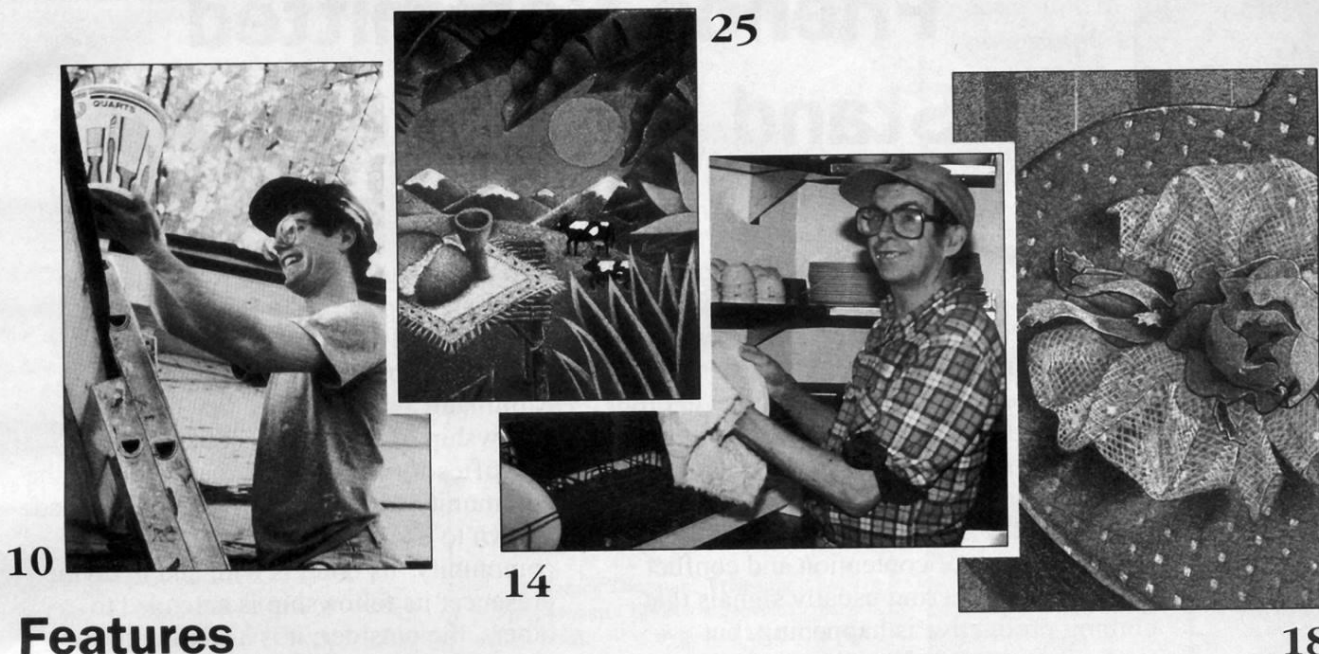
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**On the cover:** Clifton Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Ga.; inset, Bob Appleby, a member of Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church in Lilburn, Ga., assisting at the Clifton shelter for the homeless. Photos by Nancy Anne Dawe.

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# "Mysterious Pilgrimage"

## IN ATLANTA

**A small, unpretentious congregation engages in ministry "beyond its means"**

By Nancy Anne Dawe



Currie Burris, Clifton pastor, left, and two other guitarists provide worship music

Atlanta's Clifton Presbyterian Church isn't very prepossessing. It wasn't even a church at first, but a private dwelling on a residential street east of downtown Atlanta. The Presbyterian Church purchased the building in 1955 and began worship services with only 28 parishioners. The congregation has "added bits and pieces to its building over the years," says Currie Burris, the soft-spoken, 40-year-old pastor. The membership remains small—it now numbers 44.

But that's where unpretentious ends and the powerful begins. This church expresses love that far exceeds its humble appearance. Clifton's commitment to serve (with severely limited funds) through a night shelter for homeless men and a Saturday morning food pantry draws volunteers—Presbyterian and non-Presbyterian alike—from around metropolitan Atlanta. Corporations and supermarkets are involved as well.

Every day of the week, 365 days a year, Clifton's night shelter provides two meals a day to 30 homeless men, offering them end-of-the-day showers, counseling services, and encouragement. The men sleep on mats on the floor of a large central room that on Sunday is transformed into

the church's sanctuary. Mats are rolled up and put away and replaced by folding chairs set up in concentric circles.

"That space really serves as a sanctuary in two ways: a physical sanctuary for our 'guests' and a spiritual sanctuary for them and us," says Burris. "What we try to offer here is some kind of loving acceptance and a friend's hospitality. The world out there treats them like garbage, as nothing, as worthless. Here they are valued and treated as human beings."

When Burris was called to this ministry four years ago it was a fortuitous blending of person and place. But it was a circuitous path that had led him there.

Raised as a Baptist in Plantation, Fla., Burris studied at the Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, Ky., and at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. After ordination as a Baptist minister he "got into peace and justice work" and worked for Amnesty International. Following this he was employed as director of marketing for the Presbyterian Publishing House, located then in Atlanta. "While working there," he says, "I realized I could be a Presbyterian minister, and I began my search for a church. This coincided with the Publishing House's move to Louisville and Clifton's need for a pastor."

Clifton has a history of being





*Left: A Clifton shelter guest in a contemplative moment before dinner; below: bedrolls of the homeless rolled up and put away so their sleeping room can again become a sanctuary*

a church of sanctuary. In 1984 it was active in the sanctuary movement for Central American refugees; it has also been committed to women's issues; and it offers welcome to the gay and lesbian members of its community.

Burris says Clifton's members are "remarkable in their ordinariness." They work as security guards, secretaries, teachers, researchers; they struggle with their jobs and with their teenagers—"but somehow God has brought us here and engaged us in a spiritual adventure, a mysterious pilgrimage together."

The pilgrimage takes courage and heart. First of all, 120 volunteers have to be lined up each month to assist at the shelter. They come in the evenings to cook and serve the men and spend the evening with them. As a result, says Burris, "a lot of friendships are made between the men and the volunteers."

One volunteer from a group of 10 or 12 stays overnight to be available in case of emergency or a problem, such as a guest "getting out of hand." Burris says they prefer men, but occasionally a strong, independent woman volunteers who feels she can handle different circumstances.

Each evening at 6 p.m. another volunteer drives the church's bus to pick up the homeless men behind St. Luke's Episcopal Church in downtown Atlanta. (They have been issued a ticket at







**Members of Eastminster Presbyterian Church, Stone Mountain, Ga., assist every week at the Clifton shelter; left to right, Caroline Swink, youth advisor, with Jamie Johnson, Brian Uthlavy, and Dan Settles**

the shelter the night before, and as long as they are at the bus at 6 and have their ticket, they are guaranteed another night at the shelter. One man, a paranoid schizophrenic who is not a threat to himself or anyone else and who does not fit into the mental health system, has made his home here for nearly 10 years.)

Burris drives the bus on Saturday nights. "We look especially for older or disabled men who may be coming right out of the hospital or who may have been hurt or injured," he comments, "and offer a place of safety for them. Some have been drinking for 50 years; some have been through treatment but for some reason—some deep trauma or wound that might go back to childhood—they don't make it; some

come from alcoholic families and don't know any other life but that."

The men pay nothing. Some work in a labor pool, and some secure temporary employment. When they get a permanent job (which is rare, Burris says), they tend to save some money and move on.

Asked if he ever gets discouraged, Burris replies: "Sure. But the life of the congregation—the church, the worship, the fellowship—rejuvenates us all. This couldn't happen without there being a church. Otherwise it would just be a social service agency, a bureaucracy. There's burn-out, of course. Volunteers who come again and again and work hard here and think, 'I know this guy can make it,' can be discouraged when he doesn't. But whether they make it or not is not the issue. They still need care."

Clifton's members are deeply involved in the congregation's ministry. For example, Elder Rocke Thompson, in "private life" assistant director for the DeKalb County Community Development Department, which administers block grants from the federal government to low and moderate income communities, coordinates volunteers for the shelter and helps with the food pantry. "I need to do this work," he says. "I have been called to 'share the Good News,' and this is my way of doing it."

Pete Smith, a Clifton member who teaches math and science to troubled adolescents at Atlanta's private Ridgeview Institute, coordinates the food pantry. Always critically short of funds, it

somehow manages to dispense 50–60 bags of groceries each week.

Smith's co-coordinator is Theresa Johnston, an Episcopalian and a social worker. "I feel responsible as a member of the community to respond to needs of fellow Atlantans," she says. "That's why I'm here each Saturday. We make sure everybody gets what they need, and we line up other volunteers, such as high school students."

Every Saturday Thompson and Smith breakfast together, and then Thompson goes to a local supermarket to pick up donated out-of-date bread, other perishables, some bakery products, and occasionally juice or dairy products. They also purchase canned goods and other food from the Atlanta Community Food Bank at 13 cents a pound. Before the noontime disbursement of food Smith leads food pantry recipients in prayer.

Both the homeless men and those receiving groceries at Clifton give something back to the church. Women volunteer to fill the individual bags and check off names as people receive their foodstuffs. The men at the shelter clear the dinner tables and wash the dishes, and the artists among them have decorated Clifton's walls with paintings and murals.

Last Christmas, in what Burris calls "one of those luminescent moments of miracles," the men assisted a needy Atlanta mother and her four young children. The 30 men split into six teams (one for each family member and one more to wrap the gifts they planned for them), raised

**"God has brought  
us here and  
engaged us in  
a spiritual adventure"**



money for the gifts (some from panhandling), and went on a shopping spree. Dolls and a bike, racing cars, and a big, red firetruck were placed under a glittering Christmas tree in the sanctuary.

As the *Atlanta Constitution* reported it the day after Christmas: "The scene of the children unwrapping the presents was a portrait of humanity that would inspire Charles Dickens to rush for a quill. The homeless men, in plaid shirts and whiskered, smiling mugs, helped the family open the gifts and their eyes flushed with tears. Hours later, they were figuring out toy instructions and putting batteries in miniature cars. As if the children were their own."

On Sundays the men at the shelter spend the entire day there and are free to attend Clifton's church services. Burris often plays his guitar and sings in the services, along with other church members.

"Ours is not a beautiful building," Burris remarks. "If someone wants to worship here and see polished wood pews and lots of flowers, they are not going to find that here. If they are offended by homeless men sitting outside the door as they come in, this is not the place for them. If they need a pipe organ and a big choir, this is not the place. If they need a certain amount of anonymity—and some do—this is not the place for them, either. Because everybody knows everybody here, and you're not going to leave without everyone welcoming you, saying, 'Glad you're here!'"



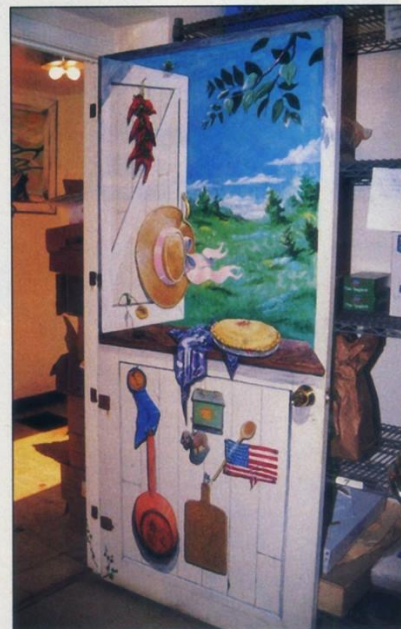
One of the residents doing his "KP" assignment after dinner

Apparently even wildlife feel welcome. When the church's roof needed repairs last year a large bird somehow got in. During Sunday worship it sailed through the sanctuary, swooping and soaring, feeling perfectly at home.

Asked if he ever regrets having given up his good job in the business world to choose this path of ministry, Burris answers swiftly: "No. It saved my life. I finally felt I was where God always meant for me to be. Every single minute here is an act of faith." ■



Nancy Anne Dawe, an Atlanta-based writer/ photojournalist whose photos frequently appear in *Presbyterian Survey*, attends St. Andrews Presbyterian Church in Tucker, Ga.



Artwork created as an expression of thanks for the church's concern