

The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

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George

The Rt. Rev. Walter C. Righter

He was, as farmers in the Midwest say, “rough as a cob.” He had a rough childhood. Sometime in the midst of his teen years he decided to run away. He became a hobo, living in their jungles, riding the rails with people as tough, or tougher, than any he had ever known. He slept under cardboard or newspapers to keep warm, drank whiskey whenever he could get it, ate canned beans over open fires, lived with lice in his clothes, alcohol in his system and purposelessness, as well as danger, every day. He roamed widely over a large portion of the United States. Along the way, he became well acquainted with the interior of jail cells as well as railroad cars.

His name was George Holloway. That’s almost all that people knew about him for years. One day, he met a woman named Jeanne, who gave him love. She was from Iowa and her mother was sick. George and Jeanne went to Iowa to care for her mother. George came to believe mightily in John 14:14 — *If you ask for anything in my name, I will do it* (Jerusalem Bible). Jeanne is described as a woman for whom Christian work was “like ice cream at a church picnic.”

On July 28, 1969, George and Jeanne started a mission for alcoholics in downtown Des Moines, Iowa. Unlike the Prodigal Son, George had no father he wanted to go home to. So he created a home for himself and others. He found a storefront in downtown Des Moines, scrounged up cots, mattresses, and some basic cooking equipment, and opened a residence for men. He and Jeanne helped them find work, helped them dry-out, and held their pay for them until they were able to make their own decisions free of alcohol. George was, as they say, “all fired up.” Their combined savings amounted to \$695. He discovered, from his reading of Scripture and from his relationship with Jeanne, what has set people free for centuries — *God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son*. I joined the board of Door of Faith Mission in 1972, shortly after I became the Bishop of Iowa. George was trying to explain the significance of John 3:16 to the board one evening. I have never been good at memorizing Biblical verses. In my ignorance, I said, “George, explain to me — what precisely is John 3:16?” His reply was blunt and shameless, “Dammit, Bishop, you ought to be ashamed of yourself.” And I was! George was just as blunt and shameless and effective about begging for resources to house and feed the people he wanted to help. God loved the world — and that included George and everyone else in it, especially those to whom George and his wife were now giving their lives.

The word “miracle” does not come easily to me, but in the same year that George was beginning his work, something else was going on. Two “recovered” alcoholics, Judge Ray

Harrison, a municipal judge in Des Moines who had worked for some years with a group he called “The Honor Roll,” which assisted alcoholics in their recovery, and Harold Hughes, a United States Senator and former Governor of Iowa as well as a former truck driver, were participating in Senate hearings held by a special committee that Senator Hughes chaired. (Judge Harrison preferred the term “recovered” to Alcoholics Anonymous’ “recovering.”) Thanks to the testimony of Judge Harrison and Senator Hughes, treatment for alcoholism came into being through the Comprehensive Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism Prevention Act of 1970. Thanks to George Holloway, the penniless street people were not left out. For almost twenty years, Door of Faith Mission cared for thousands of people. Once, during my time as director of the board, we had a fund-raising drive. The opportunity arose to move from the storefront into a large building. The Des Moines Club for the city’s business leaders was moving to the top floor of a new building and their street-level building was being sold to the Shriners. The Shriners’ building, also at street level, was available, and would give the Door of Faith Mission more space. It was decided by the board to raise the money to make the purchase. One of the Des Moines businessmen involved in raising the money said to me, “It is really easy to raise money for this project. People want to help.”

When God called George, as he would say, “home,” the preacher at his funeral was Senator Hughes, by that time retired from the Senate. But the work that the Senator, the Judge and George led so handsomely, each in his own way yet with a common goal, continues to bear fruit. Today, alcoholism is considered a disease. Treatment is available in well-known centers across the country. Major hospitals have treatment programs. Corporations have policies about alcoholism that protect jobs for people who seek treatment. And the lot of street people is better because work like George’s makes it possible for them to overcome the foggy alcoholism of the gutters.

As Harold Hughes clearly put it in his sermon at George’s funeral, “I can’t imagine George resting. Even as we honor his life here on earth, he is already engaged, right now, in caring for others, living out John 3:16 ‘God so loved the world.’ And now he knows heaven is included, too.”



Bishop Righter retired from being the Diocesan Bishop of Iowa on January, 1, 1989. Since that time, he has been an interim rector in Illinois and Ridgewood, New Jersey. He served as the Assisting Bishop in the Diocese of Newark and in the Diocese of Massachusetts. He is the author of *A Pilgrim’s Way*.

He and his wife, Nancy, moved to Export, Pennsylvania to be nearer to family. The Righters have four children, all grown and living productive lives in parts of the U.S. from New Hampshire to Florida. They also enjoy the companionship of a wonderful golden retriever.