

Q&A

Nothing is simple about Shane Claiborne

By Annette Bender

Shane Claiborne is a hot topic in Holston. Weeks after Resurrection, the conference's annual youth rally in Gatlinburg, Tenn., people are still talking about the speaker and writing about him in church newsletters.

He is a 26-year-old Maryville, Tenn., native who wears homemade clothes and accuses companies like Gap and Wal-Mart of exploiting poor workers. He is one of five founders of The Simple Way, a group that lives among and serves the homeless in north Philadelphia, Pa.

His ministry experience is varied, from a 10-week stint working alongside Mother Teresa in Calcutta, to a year spent serving a wealthy congregation at Willow Creek Community Church outside Chicago.

Some of the people attending Resurrection complained about his appearance or the way he made them feel guilty. ("If you have two coats, one belongs to the poor," said Claiborne, quoting socialist Dorothy Day.) Others were invigorated by Claiborne, calling him "the best speaker I ever heard" and looking for ways to begin serving the needy.

But almost everybody seems to be curious about Claiborne, who has been called everything from "the Dennis Rodman of evangelism" to a "contemporary Franciscan urban monk." Here – on the day after he had spent a winter night with the homeless to commemorate Gandhi's birthday – Claiborne answers *The Call*.

● **The Call (by telephone):** When we talked in Gatlinburg, you had just visited with your mom. You mentioned that you are an only child and your dad died when you were eight. You seem very close. How does your mother feel about you doing things like sleeping on the streets?

■ **Claiborne:** It's been an amazing journey for my mom and me, but I've sort of had to lead her through it in doses. She didn't really support me when I wanted to go away to Eastern College in Philly, but she said, "If God wants you to go, God will make a way." And God did; I went to Eastern

on a full scholarship. When I first began going to the city and spending a lot of time in the streets, my mom was really nervous – she cried a lot. But I say to her, "I'm not called to safety, but I promise when I go into danger, God will be with me. And there's no safer place to be than in the will and in the hand of God." I believe she believes that now.

● **Call:** Is it true that you and your mother attended First UMC in Maryville? That you had a conversion experience at Resurrection?

■ **Claiborne:** Yes, like hundreds and hundreds of kids who come forward every year at Resurrection. It was Duffy Robbins who led me to Jesus at Resurrection in 1986. That was a main draw for me at Eastern, because Duffy was a professor there. I studied youth ministry with him and sociology with Tony Campolo.

● **Call:** When did you start to become so anti-materialistic?

■ **Claiborne:** The ideas of simplicity and of anti-materialism – those emerged out of relationships with folks in poverty. At some point I couldn't go to sleep in my bed in my dorm room, knowing my sister or brother was going to be out on the streets, cold in a cardboard box. It was out of love that I began to discover that sort of freedom.

● **Call:** Some of the youth at this year's Resurrection said that you made them feel guilty. Did you mean to?

■ **Claiborne:** I didn't *want* to make them feel guilty, but I also don't think guilt is the worse thing in the world. Almost every change I've made in my life started with a good dose of guilt. Guilt is a not bad place to begin, but it's a horrible place to get stuck. You can revel in guilt and slave to guilt, and then those things start to take too much energy.

● **Call:** So what would you have the kids who heard your message do?


■ **Claiborne:** What I can't do is tell people how to translate this into their lives. Jesus resisted doing that several times. Ultimately, I hope they just fall in love with Jesus, and as they read the scriptures, the Spirit will be faithful to whisper and nudge them in a direction that is extraordinary, new, life-bringing, and very different from this world.

● **Call:** But let's say they want to take a first step toward change. What would that look like?

■ **Claiborne:** What I tell kids is that maybe you can't start by making your own clothes like I do; that would be too frustrating. But why would you buy anything new, when there is plenty of good stuff already in thrift stores? Or maybe we don't need to dress up when we go to worship. Maybe we should give our best stuff away and wear ordinary stuff to church. If anything, the poor folks would start to feel like they could come and fit in there.

2002 Photo by Kevin Slimp, The Call

Claiborne on stage at Resurrection: "The scriptures say that people of this world look at the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart."



©2002 Photo by Annette Bender, The Call

● **Call:** I heard one parent complain about your unusual clothes and hair. She said something like, "We work hard to make sure our kids dress appropriately. By having him speak at Resurrection, are we saying that it's okay to look like a freak?"

■ **Claiborne:** The scriptures are filled with freaks, from the beginning to the end. John the Baptist: Here's a dude who even in his time was crazy, wearing camel skins, eating locusts and wild honey in the desert. And what he preached was, "If you have two tunics, give one away." You know, I used to have really wild hair, colored hair. One time I was introduced as the "Dennis Rodman of evangelism," and I was so offended by that. At this particular conference, the kids were so intrigued by my hair that right there on the stage, I pulled it up and cut it off. And I said, "Now let's move on, because I think I've become too cool or too spectacular." It's not about the outward.

● **Call:** When youth asked you to sign autographs at Resurrection, I saw you writing really long messages. What did you write?

■ **Claiborne:** First of all, it was so important for me to come out and get to know the kids at Resurrection – to be relational, to pray with them – because relationships are what really bring about transformation. If they asked me to sign an autograph, I said, "I don't sign autographs but I'll write you a note." And I would write: *This is not an autograph because there is nothing special about me that is not special about you. Remember that you're beautiful just like everybody else and remember that you're broken just like everybody else.*

● **Call:** What about the money you dumped on the ground during the second weekend of Resurrection – the thousands of dollars that were supposed to be your speaker's honorarium. What was that about?

■ **Claiborne:** The main idea is we have all shared in creating the poverty and wreckage of the world. So I said, "This money belongs to the poor. God didn't create one person rich and one person poor. If you want to be a channel for the love of God but also a channel of God's redistribution of the world's resources, come forward and take what you want. But do something creative with this money, whether that's going out to eat with a homeless person or buying a bag of groceries and dropping it at someone's door."

● **Call:** Do you think the young people who took the money really used it for that?

■ **Claiborne:** It's a step of faith. I trust that they will do extraordinary things. I had students coming up to me and telling me what they were going to do with it. Some were beautifully simple, like helping someone with health bills. Some were more complex.

● **Call:** Then why did you only do that on the second weekend of Resurrection?

■ **Claiborne:** (Laughing) Because I knew it was a little bit risky, and I wanted some time to pray and reflect on it. The first weekend, I wanted to build relationships and trust with the leadership, to make sure they understood that I was not attacking the fact that they paid me that money. I finally decided that I had a really good feeling about doing it the second weekend.

The reality is, I was going to get paid a lot of money to preach this gospel, and it's true that I could do good things with that money. But I wanted us all to do small things with great love.

For information about The Simple Way, visit www.thesimpleway.org. ■

HOSPITALITY 101

How Our Church Became A Welcoming Congregation

By Linda Coffey

First Broad Street United Methodist Church in Kingsport was recently recognized as one of the denomination's top ten most hospitable congregations.

Here's what they did to get there.

When a group from First Broad Street UMC attended an Igniting Ministry training event last summer, we left with enthusiasm for what could happen in our church. We took the opportunity to evaluate our current welcoming methods and to plan ways to improve our hospitality. We have since discovered that becoming a welcoming congregation is an ongoing process.

Our first step was to develop a team to implement the Igniting Ministry campaign. The team is led by Elise Egan, who began by enlisting a co-worker to attend our church as a "mystery guest." Elise wrote a report about the mystery guest's visit, which helped the Igniting Ministry team define areas that needed attention.

For example, the Igniting Ministry planning kit suggests that if guests wear nametags, regular attenders should also wear nametags. Nametags are now available at every First Broad Street event. We also post volunteers to encourage our members to wear their nametags, and everyone has the opportunity to order a plastic, engraved tag for permanent use. This has been such a gift to our church family – more than 800 people have ordered the permanent nametags for \$5 each. They sure are helpful when familiar names slip from our memories!

Our next step was to place a Welcome Center in the church lobby. The center contains literature about church activities, maps of the building, and a continuous-run video about the United Methodist Church. Our Welcome Center is staffed on Sunday mornings with volunteers who offer coffee, information, and an escort to worship services, Sunday school, or nurseries.


Key to the success of becoming a hospitable congregation is involving every member of the church. So we provided "Welcoming 101" courses during our Wednesday night program and also to every Sunday school class from 6th grade up.

We are now offering training in "Inviting 101" on Wednesday nights and Sunday mornings. Experience has taught us that most guests come to church through personal invitation, so it's important to be intentional about looking for people to invite to church. Igniting Ministry TV and radio commercials can help to initiate conversations with friends and acquaintances about our church.

The Igniting Ministry planning kit provides a checklist for evaluating churches on their hospitality skills. We filled out and submitted the checklist, and First Broad Street was subsequently recognized as an official "Welcoming Congregation" for 2001. It's appropriate that this is a one-year recognition, because the checklist needs to be reviewed on an annual basis. It's important to keep the challenge before us to be welcoming and hospitable to all our guests.

Embracing newcomers and providing opportunities for discipleship has become a way of life in our congregation. It is our desire to let people know that our hearts, minds, and doors are always open. ■ I

► The Rev. Coffey is First Broad Street's minister of membership development. For more information on becoming a Welcoming Congregation, visit www.ignitingministry.org.



▲ **Priorities First:** First Broad Street's new Welcome Center is located where the church library used to be. "We decided that the library is for church members, and they can find the location elsewhere in the building," says the Rev. Linda Coffey (above). "It was more important that the Welcome Center be easy for guests to find."