

AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID VANDIVER

Living Christianity

Born into a devout small-town Southern Baptist family, David Vandiver is now the manager of a wilderness camp in the Appalachian Mountains near Washington, D.C., for inner-city African-American children whose backgrounds are very different from his own. Here he describes the evolution of his understanding and practice of Christianity.

"Becoming a Christian and a Baptist came as naturally as learning to walk and talk. The primary values as I grew up were ones of honesty, fairness, and caring for others. The great sins were the ones most affecting families—divorce, adultery, and irresponsible parenting. It was not until much later in my life that the vast scope of values held by Christians in differing places in the world came to my attention. I was not aware, for example, that there were Christians who believed God wanted them to influence politics for justice, work for equal rights for all people, protect the natural environment, or make peace with other nations and peoples of differing faiths. Our form of faith did a good job of supporting what was valuable in society, but did little to tear down what was destructive. We had no cause to practice tolerance because we were all so similar, except for the African-Americans in our town—about twenty percent of the population—who were already Christian and from whom we, as Anglo-Americans, wished to stay separated. I grew up with racism all around me.

"Nonetheless, as a high school youth in the early 1970s, I joined my friends in dragging my church into the foray of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement because I couldn't see Jesus as one who would keep any group of people powerless and poor. Christianity was a voice for the downtrodden and oppressed of the world, and if I was to follow Jesus, I would have to take up their cause for justice in some way.

"The most accessible way for me to take up this cause was to enter a path that would lead to a paid vocation as a Christian minister. It guided me to a Religion/Psychology major in college and later to a Masters of Divinity in Pastoral Counseling at a Baptist seminary. It was here that I began to consider the teachings of Jesus the Christ more deeply. What did it mean to 'love my neighbor as myself'? In practical terms, it came to mean that I could not



simply spend the rest of my life pursuing a comfortable living while ignoring the fact that millions are living in poverty and oppression.

"Early in my seminary days, I was married to a wonderful woman, who lost her life in an automobile accident four months after our wedding. I found

myself doubting the existence of a caring God. I was plunged into a dark night of the soul and feared I would never escape it. Slowly, as I re-emerged, it began to dawn on me that my plight was not mine alone; that millions had suffered and were suffering similar losses; that in fact, to love anyone was to risk such loss, and that the deeper the love the greater the loss. My understanding of God was transformed. It became clear to me that

anything good and loving in life was a gift, sent as a precious favor.

"When I left seminary, on the one hand, I saw that following Jesus would take me out of the mainstream of the world in order to love it fully. On the other hand, I was painfully aware of the impossibility of loving others unconditionally. What as a child was an inherent identity that I learned as easily as learning to walk became a life-long journey that I would never fully complete.

"Vocationally and geographically, I have found a home as the manager of a wilderness camp for inner-city children from Washington. It is the perfect melding of my rural, small-town roots and the passion to serve the poor and oppressed. Many of the children who come to our camp have never been out of the city. As I watch and listen to them entering this environment that is foreign to them, they become my teachers, helping me to understand the fears with which they face the wilderness, and the fears they confront at home in the city. Each time I am with them, I am reminded of how I grew up, unaware of the larger world around me. I work to help them find the tools that will assist them in loving those they find difficult to love: their enemies, abusers, oppressors, and those who ignore them. The memories of all those who have given me those tools, and have held up the imperatives of Jesus to love the world, even those whom I find difficult to love, inspire me to carry on here in this wilderness of familiar and unfamiliar experiences and people."