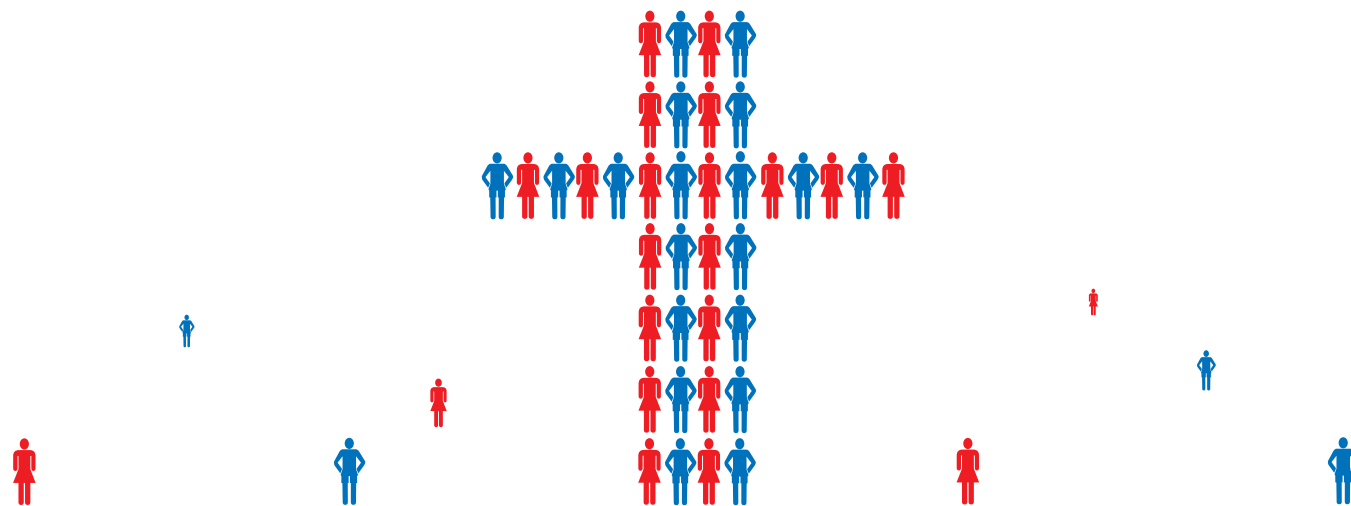


ARTICLES

The Quiverfull Conviction



Christian Mothers Breed 'Arrows for the War'

by Kathryn Joyce

When the Gospel Community Church in Cossackie, New York, breaks midservice to excuse children for Sunday school, nearly half of the 225-strong congregation patters toward the back of the worship hall: the five youngest children of Pastor Stan Slager's eight, assistant pastor Bartly Heneghan's eleven and the Dufkin family's thirteen, among many others. "The Missionettes," a team of young girls who perform ribbon dances during the praise music, put down their "glory hoops" to join their classmates; the pews empty out. It's the un-ignorable difference between the families at Gospel Community and those in the rest of the town that's led some to wonder if the church isn't a cult that forces its disciples to keep pushing out children.

But after the kids leave, Pastor Stan doesn't exhort his congregation to bear children. His approach is more subtle, reminding them to present their bodies as living sacrifices to the Lord, and preaching to them about Acts 5:20: Go tell "all the words of this life." Or, in Pastor Stan's guiding translation, to lead lives that make outsiders think, "Christianity is real," lives that "demand an explanation."

Lives such as these: Janet Wolfson is a 44-year-old mother of eight in Canton, Georgia. Tracie Moore, a 39-year-old midwife who lives in southern Kentucky, is mother to fourteen. Wendy Dufkin in Cossackie has her thirteen. And while Jamie Stoltzfus, a 27-year-old Illinois mom, has only four children so far, she plans on bearing enough to populate "two teams." All four mothers are devoted to a way of life *New York Times* columnist David Brooks has praised as a new spiritual movement taking hold among exurban and Sunbelt families. Brooks called these parents "natalists" and described their progeny as a new wave of "Red-Diaper Babies"—as in "red state."

But Wolfson, Moore and thousands of mothers like them call themselves and their belief system "Quiverfull." They borrow their name from Psalm 127: "Like arrows in the hands of a

warrior are sons born in one's youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. They will not be put to shame when they contend with their enemies in the gate." Quiverfull mothers think of their children as no mere movement but as an army they're building for God.

Quiverfull parents try to have upwards of six children. They home-school their families, attend fundamentalist churches and follow biblical guidelines of male headship—"Father knows best"—and female submissiveness. They refuse any attempt to regulate pregnancy. Quiverfull began with the publication of Rick and Jan Hess's 1989 book, *A Full Quiver: Family Planning and the Lordship of Christ*, which argues that God, as the "Great Physician" and sole "Birth Controller," opens and closes the womb on a case-by-case basis. Women's attempts to control their own bodies—the Lord's temple—are a seizure of divine power.

Though there are no exact figures for the size of the movement, the number of families that identify as Quiverfull is likely in the thousands to low tens of thousands. Its word-of-mouth growth can be traced back to conservative Protestant critiques of contraception—adherents consider all birth control, even natural family planning (the rhythm method), to be the province of prostitutes—and the growing belief among evangelicals that the decision of mainstream Protestant churches in the 1950s to approve contraception for married couples led directly to the sexual revolution and then *Roe v. Wade*.

"Our bodies are meant to be a living sacrifice," write the Hesses. Or, as Mary Pride, in another of the movement's founding texts, *The Way Home: Beyond Feminism, Back to Reality*, puts it, "My body is not my own." This rebuttal of the feminist health text *Our Bodies, Ourselves* is deliberate. Quiverfull women are more than mothers. They're domestic warriors in the battle against what they see as forty years of destruction wrought by women's liberation: contraception, women's careers, abortion, divorce, homosexuality and child abuse, in that order.

Pride argues that feminism is a religion in its own right, one that is inherently incompatible with Christianity. “Christians have accepted feminists’ ‘moderate’ demands for family planning and careers while rejecting the ‘radical’ side of feminism—meaning lesbianism and abortion,” writes Pride. “What most do not see is that one demand leads to the other. *Feminism is a totally self-consistent system aimed at rejecting God’s role for women.* Those who adopt any part of its lifestyle can’t help picking up its philosophy.” “Family planning,” Pride argues, “is the mother of abortion. A generation had to be indoctrinated in the ideal of planning children around personal convenience before abortion could be popular.”

Instead of picketing clinics, Pride writes, Christians should fight abortion by demonstrating that children are an “unqualified blessing” by having as many as God gives them. Only a determination among Christian women to take up their submissive, motherly roles with a “military air” and become “maternal missionaries” will lead the Christian army to victory. Thus is Quiverfull part of Mary Pride’s whole-cloth solution to women’s liberation: embracing an opposing way of life as total and “self-consistent” as feminism, and turning back the tide on a society gone wrong by populating the world with right-thinking Christians.

The gentle manner of Deidre Welch, another Cossackie mom, with four boys, seems at odds with Quiverfull’s militaristic language, which describes children as weapons of spiritual war, as arrows shot out by their parents. But she describes the movement toward larger families in the same way: “God is bringing revelation on the world. He wants to raise up His army. He wants His children to be.”

Angel Mays, a 31-year-old mother to three in West Virginia, spoke with me just before she was to have her tubal ligation reversed in order to make her body “God’s home” again. Mays suspects a divine purpose to her change of heart and believes the Quiverfull and home-schooling movements are signs of a revival. “It seems the Lord is preparing for something, and I’m wondering if He’s doing something big. There’s so much selfishness, with people thinking they need to make their lives easier. But we’re to seek the Kingdom of God first. The further the nation gets away from God, the starker the Christian contrast grows. The darker the world gets, the more we stand out.”

In his 2004 column for the *Times*, David Brooks concluded that mothers like Welch and Mays are too busy parenting to wage culture war. A home-schooling mother of nine on the 2,700-family-strong online forum Quiverfull Digest (www.quiverfull.com) responded in irritation to Brooks’s misunderstanding of the movement’s aims. Raising a large family, she replied, was itself her “battle station,” as deliberately political an act as canvassing for conservative candidates, not to mention part of a long-term plan to win the culture war “demographically.”

Population is a preoccupation for many Quiverfull believers, who trade statistics on the falling white birthrate in European

countries like Germany and France. Every ethnic conflict becomes evidence for their worldview: Muslim riots in France, Latino immigration in California, Sharia law in Canada. The motivations aren’t always racist, but the subtext of “race suicide” is often there.

Pastor Heneghan of Gospel Community Church sees the issue of population growth in more biblical terms, specifically those taken from Genesis and Revelation. “Some people think that what I’m doing—having eleven children—is wrong. I don’t really get into that much. The Bible says ‘be fruitful and multiply.’ That’s my belief system. They don’t believe in God, so they think we have to conserve what we have. But in my belief system, He’s going to give us a new earth.” Overpopulation isn’t a problem in a universe where God promises a clean global slate.

In the Quiverfull view, Christians should demonstrate that children are an ‘unqualified blessing’ by having as many as God gives them.

As a movement, Quiverfull has grown in a grassroots style. There’s little top-down instruction or organization from church leaders; instead it spreads through community Bible studies, home-schooling forums, “prolife” activist circles or small ministries such as “Titus 2” wife-mentoring groups, which instruct Christian women in biblical wifedom. Supporter Allan Carlson, an economic historian who heads the Howard Center for Family, Religion and Society and advises conservative legislators like Kansas Senator Sam Brownback, sees Quiverfull’s most significant roots in the home-schooling movement, and as with the early days of home-schooling, he sees Quiverfull as a populist movement with “a wonderful anarchy to it.”

But while home-schoolers may be more receptive to the idea of unplanned families, most prospectives actually learn about the Quiverfull conviction through the movement’s literature: Pride’s and the Hesses’ books, Nancy Campbell’s *Be Fruitful and Multiply*, Rachel Scott’s *Birthing God’s Mighty Warriors* or Sam and Bethany Torode’s *Open Embrace*. And most people find these books after hearing the theory that birth-control pills are an abortifacient (that hormonal contraception such as the pill can cause the “chemical abortion” of accidentally fertilized eggs). This belief is something the Quiverfull conviction has in common with the larger Christian right, which has recently embraced a radically expanded “prolife” agenda that encompasses not just abortion but birth control and sexual abstinence. Taking a page from the antiabortion movement, anticontraception activists have gradually broadened their aims, moving from defending individual “conscientiously objecting” pharmacists who refuse to dispense contraceptives on moral grounds to extending the same “right of refusal” to corporate entities such as insurers, to an out-and-out offensive against birth control as the murder-through-prevention of 3,000 lives a day and also as the future undoing of Western civilization.

The latter two points were recently made in Illinois by British demographer Andrew Pollard, a speaker at the pioneering “Contraception Is Not the Answer” conference in September. That event served as a sort of coming-out party for the anti-contraception movement, following an August cover story on “The Case for Kids” in the evangelical flagship magazine

Christianity Today. Pundits warning of a coming “demographic divide,” wherein fecund red states will far outnumber barren blue state liberals, are further ratcheting up interest in fertility politics. But before the movement made this mainstream splash, a quieter opposition to birth control had been building for years.

Among the first contemporary Protestants advancing the theory that contraception is anathema to Scripture was Charles Provan, an independent Pennsylvania printer, lay theologian and father to ten who was until recently deeply involved in the Holocaust revisionist movement. In 1989 Provan, whom both Pride and the Hesses name as an inspiration, published *The Bible and Birth Control*, which has been called the authoritative source for Protestants seeking scriptural guidance on contraception. In it, Provan traces Protestant opposition to birth control to three main scriptural bases: Psalm 127, the Genesis command to “be fruitful and multiply,” and the biblical story of Onan, slain by God for spilling his seed on the ground (seen by Provan as a form of birth control).

No Protestant denomination accepted birth control until 1930, when the Anglican Church endorsed contraceptive use among married couples. Quiverfull author Rachel Scott sees that moment as the beginning of a biblically prophesied era of “70 years in Babylon”—in this case a spiritual Babylon that declared children to be a “choice”—that ended (rather inexactly) with 9/11, seventy-one years later.

The fall of the Twin Towers is a popular turning point in the Quiverfull narrative. Becca Campos, a 34-year-old Nebraska mother of five who works as an administrator for a sterilization reversal ministry, Blessed Arrows, explains: “The Bible says that if a nation humbles itself and prays together, God will turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children. After 9/11, people started looking inward.” Campos sees the schedule change of her 2001 tubal ligation reversal in Mexico—from September 10 to September 8—as God’s provision that she shouldn’t be stuck south of the border during her recovery, unable to board a plane home. The references aren’t so much Falwellian bombast—9/11 as God’s judgment on a sinful country—as the magical thinking that goes along with a faith strong enough to convince poor families, who are struggling to make ends meet as it is, that God will provide for them unequivocally.

“Lean not on your own understanding,” Quiverfull mom Tracie Moore tells me, describing the scriptural foundations she’s discovered for the movement: Children are a blessing, a reward, an inheritance. Don’t worry about money—the Moores have never had much of it—because God will provide for his flock.

And in its most innocuous self-explanations, this is what Quiverfull is about: faith, pure and simple. Faith that God won’t give women more children than they can handle, and faith that by opening themselves up to receive multiple “blessings,” they will bring God’s favor upon them in other areas of life as well: Their husbands will get better jobs; God will send a neighbor with a sack of used children’s clothes just when the soles on Johnny’s shoes fall out. God, many Quiverfull women say, deals with their hearts about birth control, and if they submit, they are cared for.

This last equation—submit, and be cared for—is a fitting summary of the social logic of the Quiverfull life. While most Quiverfull families appear to be solidly working class or low income, even those in the middle-income brackets struggle with the financial challenges of caring for a ten-person family. But for many Quiverfull mothers, this struggle is still preferable to the alternatives they see society offering working-class women—alternatives they see as the fruit of secular feminism. For poor women, the feminist fight for job equality won them no career path but rather the right to pink-collar labor, as a housekeeper, a waitress, a clerk. The sexual revolution did not bring them self-exploration and fulfillment but rather loosened the social restraints that bound men to the household as husbands and fathers. Even for women who stayed in the home, the incidence of women in the workplace led employers to stop offering a “family wage” that could sustain both parents and children.

Mary Pride puts it in biblical terms—feminism made wage slaves out of women who had once been slaves to God; it made “unpaid prostitutes” out of women who should have been godly mothers and wives. Yet there’s something

deeper here than standard antifeminist backlash. While economic and cultural complaints may attract believers to Quiverfull, conviction, and the momentum of a growing movement, are what sustains them.

Rachel Scott, who calls herself a “one-woman Quiverfull activist,” describes her conversion moment. One night after the birth of her fourth child—their third “oops” baby due to birth-control failures—when the prospect of tuition for four consumed husband Christopher and their pastor was urging vasectomy, Christopher saw a warrior angel in his dream. A “large, worrying warrior angel” with a flaming sword that he pointed at Christopher’s genitals, telling him, “Do not change God’s plan.”

While Scott pays tribute to the foundation of the Quiverfull movement in Pride’s books and the home-schooling movement, she distinguishes herself from the “hard line” of Quiverfull believers, whom she sees as holding each other to purity tests: How many kids do you have? Do you home-school? Concerned that such stringency could alienate potential believers, Scott instead promotes a gentler Quiverfull, so that average Christian families feel up to the task of “Birthing God’s Mighty Warriors.” “Like all good buildings, the foundation needs to be strong. But the Bible says, ‘All men come.’ The foundation’s been laid and now God’s starting to change people’s minds, both inside and outside of the church. Before the end times, the Bible says the family will be restored, whether they’re in church or out of church,” says Scott.

The hard Quiverfull line is something that bothers Dawn Irons, founder of Blessed Arrows. After Lyme disease left Irons “postfertile,” she felt stung by the assertions of “movement Quiverfullers,” who view the number of children one has as a gauge of holiness or spirituality. “If you follow the discussions on the Quiverfull Digest right now, you can see what happens when a ‘movement’ mentality sets in. Someone just asked the

*If the Quiverfull mission is rooted in faith,
its mandate has tangible results as well.
Namely, to provide ‘arrows for the war.’*

question today if a person can really be considered Quiverfull if they're past the age of childbearing...as if being able to birth a baby is all that makes one Quiverfull. It's a heart change."

Becca Campos agrees. She says that Quiverfull shouldn't be thought of as a movement but as a return to an old ideal. Current speculation on the Quiverfull Digest as to whether larger families are becoming "a fad" grows from some people "making an idol of it." Of course, the nature of mass movements is a blunting of subtleties, and a winnowing down of theology to the most easily understood denominator. In this case: babies, lots of them, for God.

When I visited Janet and Ted Wolfson at their paintball farm in Canton, Georgia, for a planned Quiverfull picnic (one cut short by bad weather and Rachel Scott's cardinal rule that "with eight children, plans are always subject to change"), the Wolfsons and their guests were discussing the reasons for sticking with Quiverfull through the hard times. An anonymous mother had written in to the Quiverfull Digest full of despair, saying she felt she was "going to die." Her husband was older and unhelpful around the house, and she feared he would die and leave her to raise their six children alone and destitute. She wanted someone on the forum to give her a reason—besides the Bible—why one should be Quiverfull. The answers were quick and pointed: Apart from Scripture, there's no reason why one should be Quiverfull.

"If you don't invoke God's word, then there's really no reason," the Wolfsons explained. "Kids are great and all that, but in reality, it's all about the Bible."

But if the Quiverfull mission is rooted in faith, the unseen, its mandate to be fruitful and multiply has tangible results as well. Namely, in Rick and Jan Hess's words, to provide "arrows for the war."


After arguing Scripture, the Hesses point to a number of more worldly effects that a Christian embrace of Quiverfull could bring. "When at the height of the Reagan Revolution," they write, "the conservative faction in Washington was enforced [*sic*] with squads of new conservative congressmen, legislators often found themselves handcuffed by lack of like-minded staff. There simply weren't enough conservatives trained to serve in Washington in the lower and middle capacities." But if just 8 million American Christian couples began supplying more "arrows for the war" by having six children or more, they propose, the Christian-right ranks could rise to 550 million within a century ("assuming Christ does not return before then"). They like to ponder the spiritual victory that such numbers could bring: both houses of Congress and the majority of state governor's mansions filled by Christians; universities that embrace creationism; sinful cities reclaimed for the faithful; and the swift blows dealt to companies that offend Christian sensibilities.

"With the nation's low birth rate, the high divorce rate, an un-marrying and anti-child viewpoint, and a debauched nation perhaps unable to slow down the spread of AIDS, we can begin to see what happens politically. A half-billion person boycott of a company which violated God's standards could be very effective.... Through God's blessing we would be part of a replay of Exodus 1:7, 'But the sons of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly, and multiplied, and became exceedingly mighty, so that the land was filled with them.'"

The New York Times

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“Brethren,” they write, “it’s time for a comeback!”

The fact that, in 2006, their predictions read less like Left Behind fantasies than a slight exaggeration of the past year’s religious news is a testament to what’s changed since the Hesses published their book more than fifteen years ago.

Quiverfull is not yet a large movement. The number of families wholly committed to its path doesn’t represent any pollster’s idea of a key demographic. But it’s nonetheless culturally significant for representing an ideal: an illustration of the family structure many conservatives reference in condemning modern society. Not every family has to be “Quiverfull,” in the sense of having six or eight children, for the movement to make an impact. Mothers who have four kids instead of three can also reinforce the Quiverfull goal of a return to the traditional, patriarchal family as the basic economic unit of society.

Their language reflects the church’s ‘constant state of war’: the husband a ‘commanding officer’ and his wife a ‘private’ below him.

Even as the movement seeks to mellow its image to mainstream its message, the revival dreams the Hesses had in the 1990s have become popular talking points in their own right through the work of social scientists like Phillip Longman, a demographer at the centrist New America Institute and the author of *The Empty Cradle: How Falling Birthrates Threaten World Prosperity and What to Do About It*, and the man Longman describes as his “dark shadow,” Allan Carlson. Though Carlson comes at natalism from the right and Longman, putatively the secular vanguard of the movement, works on the issue from the middle, their positions are sufficiently similar for Longman to have endorsed Carlson’s controversial pro-Quiverfull treatise, “The Natural Family: A Manifesto.”

Carlson is fond of recalling early opponents of birth control such as Teddy Roosevelt and the New Deal-era “maternalists” who pushed through the traditionalist strictures written into the first Social Security Act, which defined beneficiary families as breadwinning fathers and homemaking mothers. Roosevelt, according to Carlson, associated birth control with “race suicide” and selfish white women who “import our babies from abroad” rather than honor their duty to bear children for the nation. Like Roosevelt and the maternalists, Carlson wants to construct a secular, social-policy case for natalism based on the importance of large families to sustaining a Social Security system crippled by childless “free riders.” As with the “family friendly” tax policies Carlson has written for conservative politicians such as Senator Brownback and Nebraska Representative Lee Terry—which reward large families with hefty tax cuts for each child—Carlson says that “the sub-theme of all I do is pro-natalism.”

But faith, he says, is the necessary yeast for any secular movement, and religion has always been the driving force behind the family movement. In the same way that Carlson recalls the “strand of garrison life” that the cold war fight against Communism brought to American society, in the conservative Christian world that sees Europe as the measure of mankind’s fall, a besieged war mentality is a given. In both Carlson’s writings and in the work of Mary Pride and the Hesses, this is reflected in their description of patriarchal families as the basic “cellular

units of society” that form a bulwark against Communism, as well as in the military-industrial terminology they assign to biblical gender roles within such “cells”: the husband described as company CEO, the wife as plant manager and the children as workers. Or, in alternate form, the titles revised to reflect the Christian church’s “constant state of war” with the world: “Commander in Chief” Jesus, the husband a “commanding officer” and his wife a “private” below him. And the kids? Presumably ammunition, arrows, weapons for the war.

Thus patriarchy, and its requirement that wives submit to their husbands, becomes a mission in itself, the inversion of a reactionary movement into a seeming revolution against modern society. As Pride writes, “Submission has a military air.... When the private is committed to winning the war, and is willing to subject his personal desires to the goal of winning, and is willing to follow the leader his Commander has put over him, that army stands a good chance of winning.”

But how well are these arguments being received in the larger society? There are signs of denominations and churches picking up the Quiverfull philosophy, not least among these the statements made by Southern Baptist Theological Seminary president Al Mohler last year, who wrote that deliberate childlessness among Christian couples is “moral rebellion” and “an absolute revolt against God’s design.” Meanwhile, Phillip Longman hardly offers a left-wing counterpoint. Instead, he’s searching—at the request of the Democratic Leadership Council, which published his policy proposals in its *Blueprint* magazine—for a way to appeal to the same voters Carlson is organizing: a typically “radical middle” quest to figure out how Democrats can make nice with Kansas.

“Who are these evangelicals?” asks Longman. “Is there anything about them that makes them inherently prowar and for tax cuts for the rich?” No, he concludes. “What’s irreducible about these religious voters is that they’re for the family.” Asked whether the absolutist position Quiverfull takes on birth control, let alone abortion, might interfere with his strategy, Longman admits that abortion rights would have to take a back seat but that, in politics, “nobody ever gets everything they need.”

Aside from the centrist tax policies Longman is crafting to rival Carlson’s, he urges a return to patriarchy—properly understood, he is careful to note, as not just male domination but also increased male responsibility as husbands and fathers—on more universal grounds. Taking a long view as unsettling in its way as Pastor Bartly Heneghan’s rapture talk, Longman says that no society can survive to reproduce itself without following patriarchy. “As secular and libertarian elements in society fail to reproduce, people adhering to more traditional, patriarchal values inherit society by default,” Longman argues, pointing to cyclical demographic upheavals from ancient Greece and Rome to the present day, when falling birthrates have consistently augured conservative, even reactionary comebacks, marked by increased nationalism, religious fundamentalism and deep societal conservatism. Presenting a thinly veiled ultimatum to moderates and liberals,

Longman cites the political sea change in the Netherlands in recent years, where, he charges, a population decline led to a vacuum that “Muslim extremists came in to fill.” Though individual, nonpatriarchal elements of society may die out, he says, societies as a whole will survive and, “through a process of cultural evolution, a set of values and norms that can roughly be described as patriarchy reemerge.”

Longman’s answer to this threat is for progressives to beat conservatives by joining them, emulating the large patriarchal families that conservatives promote in order not to be overrun by a reactionary baby boom. Any mention of social good occurring in regions with low birthrates is swept away by the escalating rhetoric of a “birth dearth,” a “baby bust,” a dying hemisphere undone by its own progressive politics.

That’s how Quiverfull mother Wendy Dufkin sees it, give or take a few mentions of the Lord’s name: God is leading Quiverfull families at the head of a “return to patriarchy, to father-led families. Patriarchy may be a loaded word for some, but it’s not for me. There are so many woman-led families, whether single mothers or families where the father is just absent. I think it’s gone to such an extreme with those families for a while that now we’re returning to another extreme, patriarchy.”

She recounts the “seven stages of decline of the Roman Empire” as illustration: from men failing to lead their families to God, through adultery, divorce, homosexuality, barrenness, atheism and then, in the end, an invasion of barbarians from abroad.

The invasion, the war, is to be understood on both planes: the worldly war that a good patriot like Dufkin likely supports, and the spiritual war of the church, which will continue indefinitely. Where the two meet—in the generally low-income households of believers who feel bound to supply their children, their arrows for God—you might expect a clash of consciences, such as when Deidre Welch explains what she sees as a “media attitude” about bearing many children. “This idea of, why bring children into this world, a world of violence, just to get drafted?” The example seems poignant—her oldest son has just left for Iraq—but Welch remains optimistic, bearing in mind the biblical promise that “God can use your Quiverfull to bring up his army of belief.” As a believer and a loving mother, perhaps she sees this path—worldwide redemption through spiritual and actual warfare—as the one that will lead to the end of wars, even if that path means the wars will be fought with arrows such as her son. ■

FARMERS’ MARKETS HELP POOR PEOPLE TO EAT BETTER AND LOCAL AGRICULTURE TO SURVIVE.

A New Idea Grows in Alabama

MARK WINNE

Dr. Jill Foster was a practicing family physician in Cincinnati when she became increasingly dismayed treating preventable illnesses. “A young female patient of mine who weighed 200 pounds asked me, ‘Doctor, am I obese?’ Foster recalls. “When I told her she was, the poor child was devastated.” As both a vegetarian and doctor, Foster knew that unhealthy diets were the root cause of many of her patients’ problems. So rather than slog upstream through the quickening torrent of diet-related disease, she took leave from her practice to study nutritional science in Birmingham, Alabama.

Had she been looking for the fastest route to the belly of the beast, Foster couldn’t have chosen a better place. According to the Trust for America’s Health, Alabama has the second-highest level of adult obesity (28.9 percent) in the nation. For African-Americans the numbers are worse: 38 percent are obese. And 286,000 Alabamians, or about 6 percent of the state’s population, have been diagnosed with diabetes, a number that has climbed by more than 50 percent since 1994.

As a new resident of Birmingham, Dr. Foster, a petite black



EMILY FLAKE

woman, soon noticed that most of the people around her were at least fifty pounds heavier than she was. “Poverty has a lot to do with obesity,” she noted, “and so does race. When you’re poor, you eat what’s cheap and what’s available.” She also found that the only vegetables available in the city’s poorer neighborhoods were fried okra and fried green tomatoes.

Foster’s experience comes as no surprise to researchers and community food advocates, who commonly use the term “food desert” to describe the lack of affordable, healthy food outlets across the country. In general, the data show that people living in lower-income, nonwhite communities must travel greater distances to reach well-stocked and reasonably priced food stores than people living in higher-income areas. Healthy food is also more expensive on a calorie-for-calorie basis than junk food. According to the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, the real cost of fresh fruits and vegetables has risen nearly 40 percent in the past twenty years, while the real cost of soda, sweets, fats and oils has gone down.

While Alabama’s obesity rate tops the national charts, the state is beginning to distinguish itself for its efforts to improve its food environment. Tapping into Alabama’s agrarian roots, community leaders, clergy and government officials are hoping that

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