



PSALM 127:1 "UNLESS THE LORD BUILDS THE HOUSE, ITS BUILDERS LABOR IN VAIN. UNLESS THE LORD WATCHES OVER THE CITY, THE WATCHMEN STAND GUARD IN VAIN."

REBUILDING

THE RUINS

BY JACKIE FOGAS

ILLUSTRATION BY
THOMAS KUHNENBECK

AGAINST THE ODDS, ONE FAMILY FIGHTS FOR A BEAUTIFUL FUTURE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN A POVERTY-STRICKEN AREA OF ST. LOUIS

"In case you didn't know, 'More Than Carpentry' is two years old," says Jim McGarry at the fledgling ministry's annual board meeting in May. "And it's acting just like a two-year-old," adds Tammy, Jim's wife. The board members—all leaders at Memorial Presbyterian Church (PCA) in St. Louis, Mo.—laugh. They know each success and setback the McGarrys have faced in their effort to bring the love of God to a forgotten and neglected community.

Just north of the eclectic Loop area of University City in St. Louis lies Wellston, a once-thriving community now full of abandoned and burned-out buildings, drug houses, overgrown lots, and junk piles. Who would want to move here? Certainly not most businesses desiring viability and prosperity. The area feels the neglect, and it will take committed people with unwavering faith and vision to come in town and set up shop. That's exactly what Jim and Tammy and their six children are doing. And as soon as they can, the family will move in.

BLUEPRINT FOR MINISTRY

More Than Carpentry (MTC) currently functions as a ministry of Memorial, but their sights are set on becoming a financially self-supporting nonprofit. The ministry will involve teaching the trade of custom cabinet making to high-school dropouts, convicted felons, and other “at risk” people in Wellston. The vision also includes developing mentoring relationships with trainees that will teach them life skills such as managing finances and caring for children.

The original timeline shows the family moving this fall and the ministry officially commencing next fall. “If money were no object,” Tammy says, “that would happen.” But vandalism, break-ins, theft, and other financial setbacks abound at the 30,000-square-foot warehouse and stall the progress. “This past year, we had more than \$50,000 of tools and equipment stolen,” Tammy says. Yet the hope of the gospel coming to this depressed area drives the McGarry family to continue their fight for redemption and reconciliation.

A basic curriculum, three to four hours of weekly class time, and on-the-job training provide the ministry’s framework. “Apprentices won’t just make birdhouses,” explains Jim. “They’ll actually learn how to make custom cabinets. We want them to feel the dignity of accomplishment.” The program will include Bible study, job skill training, mentoring (encouragement and

need another job-training program,” Jim shares. “But when I told him about the ministry—that we will pay people as they learn this skill as well as mentor them—he said, ‘Oh, you’re talking about jobs. We need those. You are welcome here.’”

MOTIVATED FOR MISSION

A lot of life experience—and a healthy dose of adversity—prepared the McGarrys for this work. Both Jim and Tammy had challenging childhoods with lingering family strife, and neither grew up in the church. When Jim was kicked out of his house at age 16, he continued working for a Christian couple who owned a trucking line.

“They loved me for who I was and where I was,” Jim shares. “They showed me the gospel, and they took me to church.” His employers remained committed to him throughout his teenage struggles. “Though it didn’t show up until years later,” Jim says, “it was their love that inspired More Than Carpentry.”

Tammy left home at 18, and she and Jim moved away and into a trailer. They married four months later, and within six months Tammy was pregnant with their first child, Jessica. Overwhelmed by the impending responsibility and lack of finances, Jim joined the military. At this time, Tammy desired to read the Bible, and God inclined her heart to Him. She put her firstborn in a stroller and walked to the nearest church, where she became a Christian. They had children Sarah and James before

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empowerment), and—very importantly—a paycheck for apprentices. For apprentices without diplomas, MTC will require involvement in a General Education Development (GED) program.

“When we arrived last spring, one man told me, ‘We don’t

Jim’s military job took them to California. Once there, they excitedly made plans to raise their family in “the Golden State.”

However, God began working the theme of reconciliation deep into their hearts. After three or four years of no communication with their families, they felt God calling them home to

St. Louis. "It was a progression of God opening our eyes to see that we too had been forgiven undeservedly," Tammy says.

WORKS OF GRACE

We didn't want to live in Missouri," Tammy recalls with a laugh. "And we certainly did not want to live in a city." Like the turning of Saul's heart toward the Gentiles in Acts, God transformed Jim and Tammy's hearts toward the city of St. Louis and gave them a gospel-centered love for it.

They began a construction and remodeling business in 1994 and settled into life in Missouri. A two-week mission trip to Bolivia in 1998 solidified the couple's call into ministry and helped them apply all they had been learning. "The people ministering there really encouraged us that we had gifts and skills we could share, even though we weren't seminary trained," Jim explains.

Back in St. Louis and ready to move forward with ministry, Jim connected with a prison ministry to employ ex-cons. "I felt led to hire people no one else would hire and give them an opportunity," he says. This led to the financial downfall of the business, but it sparked a vision for this work as ministry—realized in 2005 as More Than Carpentry. In the meantime, Jim started Classic Carpentry, a family business currently run out of the warehouse.

Around this time, God brought Jim and Tammy's heart to serve the needy and to see racial reconciliation in this city very close to home. It began as a rekindling of their pre-marriage desire to be foster parents. "We talked about doing this because of our difficult home lives," Tammy explains.

A stint of respite care for a 23-month-old named Alec brought confirmation to the McGarrys that they weren't designed to be foster parents. When Alec left, they cried for three days. "We realized we couldn't handle having kids coming and going," Tammy says. Eventually, Alec and his African-American biological brothers Chris and Kevin joined the McGarry family. Their adoptions became official in 2001. The varying ethnic looks of the six McGarry children—even among the biological siblings—earned them the affectionate nickname "the rainbow tribe" by a social worker.

THE HARVEST IS PLENTIFUL

Curious neighbors continue to watch the family from their porches; slowly, relationships are forming. Already, potential apprentices have knocked on the warehouse door, but they've regretfully been turned away for now. "We don't want to open until we're ready to do [the ministry] well," Tammy explains.

Thus far, financial limitations have depressed the progress—and sometimes the McGarrys' spirits. "When people broke in and stole Jim's skid loader—a \$30,000 piece of equip-

ment—that was really discouraging," Tammy shares. "He used that on a daily basis. At those times, it's hard not to question what God is doing."

When the McGarrys' eyes turn toward circumstances and away from the Lord, discouragement settles in. "We're exhausted and weary," Tammy says candidly. "We would have given up a long time ago if this wasn't God's call." But as they rely on God to build this ministry, He provides them with the encouragement they need to keep praying and living as advocates for justice.

Amid struggles, they praise God for the blessings: 10,000 volunteer hours last year, donated office furniture, a local businessman's offer to let his employees spend occasional workdays at the Wellston warehouse, a 45-year resident who remembers the city in its prime and desires to be active in restoring the city, and a three-page summary of the ministry typed by a volunteer who was seeking support for the ministry from his church. "We had no idea he was writing this," Tammy shares. "It felt like someone had caught the vision and was in the trenches with us."

REDEMPTION

Today, the neighbors on Steven Jones Avenue watch as groups of volunteers come in spurts to help out—some on monthly Saturday workdays, others with Mission to the World for weeklong trips, and still others who just fit it in.

So far, volunteers have worked in the office and beautified the property by picking up trash, raking leaves, and planting bushes, trees, and flowers. They've begun the warehouse renovation by demolishing and constructing walls and painting.

A current volunteer says, "Not only has this shown me that the body of Christ is bigger than any one church, but also that God provides to those committing to carrying out His will. His love for the poor, disadvantaged, and broken is greater than we can imagine."

As the Lord builds laborers for this vision, the McGarrys look forward to the day when they will live among their Wellston neighbors in a restored warehouse with apprentices, mentors, and neighbors coming and going, kids playing in a future green space in the yard, while the sounds of saws and hammers proclaim the glory of God and His work of restoration and reconciliation. One day, if the Lord wills, the people of Wellston will see an example of the promise of Isaiah 61:4: "They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations." ■

JACKIE FOGAS IS A WRITER AND EDITOR IN ST. LOUIS, MO. SHE CURRENTLY WORKS IN THE PUBLIC RELATIONS OFFICE AT COVENANT SEMINARY. JACKIE WORKED AT *SOUTHERN LIVING MAGAZINE* FOR SEVEN YEARS BEFORE MOVING TO ST. LOUIS WITH HER HUSBAND, MICHAEL, A THIRD-YEAR MDIV STUDENT AT COVENANT SEMINARY.

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