

PROFILE: A Practical Calling

Dorsey Walker doesn't turn away from anyone in need. The Methodist minister, who lives in northern Alabama, has devoted his life to people who have fallen on hard times.

Walker, 45, heads a cooperative of 10 churches headquartered in the Appalachian town of Sylvania. The Upper Sand Mountain Parish helps feed, clothe, transport, and shelter people, primarily those living within Jackson and De Kalb counties. Thanks to Walker, the cooperative's ministry also forages into neighboring states and urban areas.

A crooked smile and jutting jaw are dominant features in Walker's lined face.

The open-neck shirt and corduroy slacks on his tall frame show that he's not a man who takes a half-hour to choose a tie for the day. Helping people often means dirty hands, backbreaking labor, and long hours—and ties are not required.

Walker figures about 400 families would have gone hungry last year if it hadn't been for the parish's emergency food boxes.

Some of the food comes from the "Gleaning Project," whose volunteers harvest surplus vegetables donated by farmers. Recipients later receive seed for growing their own gardens.

"It's one of the programs we feel best about," Walker says. "For every dollar we put in the program, there is a return of about \$45."

Nine families now have houses of their own, and many others have homes worth living in because of the parish's "Heart and Hand Project." Others have warm clothes and shoes because of the "Better Way Second Hand Shop," manned and stocked by volunteers.

Many of these volunteers are those who have been helped in the past. They now have food because of vegetable gardens grown with cooperative supplies.

Also, through the parish's ministry, rural folks who do not have transportation can get to the doctor

and to the grocery store at least once a week.

Walker is at the helm of all this good will. His childhood was the perfect grounding for a ministry with a practical bent. He was born in 1944 in rural Somerville, Ala. On the family dairy farm, he learned farming, carpentry, canning, and other skills that have helped him in his ministry.

He credits his practical side to his father, who, in addition to farming, was an engineer with Alabama's Redstone Arsenal.

"You can do anything you want to do," his father told Walker and his twin brother. "But you're going to have one emphasis in mathematics."

So Walker got the obligatory math degree at Athens College and his master's degree in theology at Emory University.

"I had an interest in a lot of different things, not simply sitting in a church office," he says in a fast-paced Southern drawl.

This linguistic peculiarity matches the man: an entrepreneur whose wheeler-dealer talents are geared toward God's goals.

Walker calls his wife, Brenda, the parish's "chief volunteer." Her quiet nature complements his animated personality. The Walkers have two children, Ken Robbin and Christie.

Spiritual as well as physical needs are met at the Upper Sand Mountain Parish, Walker says, somewhat reluctant to talk about such matters. He's unconventional for a man of the cloth, perhaps. But Walker finds his spiritual work easier if he first satisfies physical hunger.

"If Jesus could just get ahold of him," a woman lamented recently to the minister. She explained how her husband's drinking left her family without food.

"That's when she and I prayed," Walker explains.

He calls his various ministries "fleshing out the gospel."

"How do we put hands and feet on what we say?" Walker asks, his voice taking on a ministerial tone. "How on earth can we talk about caring about people who are hungry and homeless if they are at our doorstep and we've not done anything?"

"He is one of the best people I

Dorsey Walker dreams of opening a cannery in this donated building when the parish has enough volunteer labor and money to complete the renovation. Photo: Nancy Dorman-Hickson



know at locating resources," notes Fred Webster, a parish staff member and a minister himself. "We're just a little rural cooperative, but we get funding like we do as a result of his organization and ability."

Walker also has an uncommon—some would say a divine—talent for seeing how others can help and for persuading them to do so. That's how the Gleaning Project began.

"If there's not a market for a crop, the crop is not even harvested," Walker says. Upper Sand Mountain potato farmers were in just such a situation. So the parish began paying area farmers 3 cents a pound for the crops, which otherwise would have rotted in the fields.

Walker heard another opportunity knocking when he learned of truck drivers who were participating in the Job Training Placement Act. These drivers-in-training are required to log a certain amount of road hours, often carrying concrete blocks to simulate a load.

Walker arranged for the truckers to transport donated food to destinations where people needed it.

Is there something grander than

coincidence gracing the Sand Mountain parish? "That's the reason I'm still here," Walker answers. "Sometimes, things just unbelievably fall into place. You can call it coincidence, you can call it whatever, but there's affirmation in it for me."

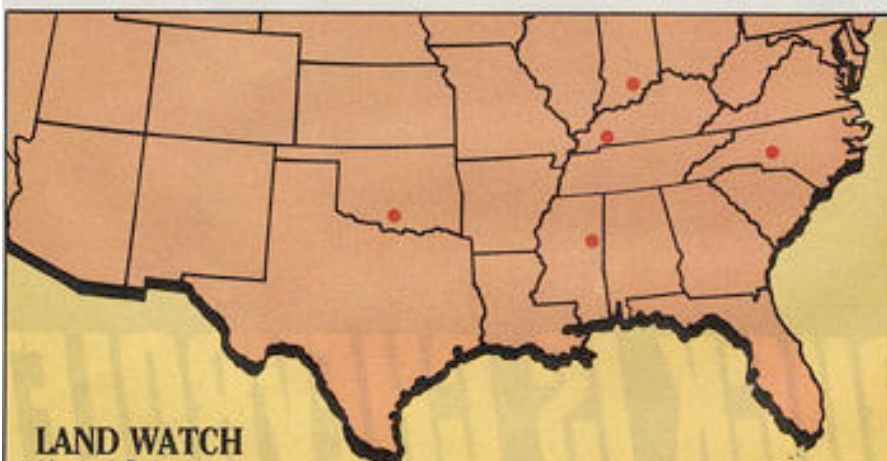
He gives short shrift to those who emphasize spiritual matters over practical needs.

"We get ministers up here and they'll say, 'You mean, I'm to drive that van?' or 'You mean, I'm to help give out vegetables?'" he says. "And you have a lot of 'churchy' type laity who don't realize the need around them. They really can drive right by the shacks and honest-to-goodness never see them."

Statistics about the poor are debatable. But the flesh and blood behind poverty cannot be disputed.

Walker sees it in the bruises of the abused mother who seeks warm clothing for her baby. He hears it in the voice of the laid-off father who asks for food for his family. And he feels it in the blue-veined palm of the lonely elderly woman who clasps his hand in prayer.

Nancy Dorman-Hickson



LAND WATCH (Actual Sales)

- **Piedmont area of North Carolina.** 70 acres cropland. Sold for \$82,149, or \$1,174 per acre.
- **Western Kentucky.** 429 acres. 389 acres cropland with corn, wheat, burley, and dark-fired tobacco bases. Sold for \$397,000, or \$925 per acre.
- **Southeastern Indiana.** 211 acres with 177 acres cropland. Ranch house, grain storage bins, and equipment shed. Sold for

\$222,000, or \$1,052 per acre.

- **East Mississippi.** 75 acres Blackland Prairie. Recreational bottomland. Sold for \$27,375, or \$365 per acre.
- **South-central Oklahoma.** 80 acres. 35 in wheat, balance in native and improved grass pasture. Sold for \$39,600, \$495 per acre.

Sources: Farm Credit Services, Louisville, Ky.; Mike Turner, Turner Land Co., Ringling, Okla.; Rogers Cobb, Midland Appraisal Co., Batesburg, S.C.; and Equitable Agri-Business, Inc., Livingston, Ala.

LETTERS

Ozone, Not Acid Rain

"I appreciate *Progressive Farmer's* featuring air pollution research from the Southern Commercial Forest Research Cooperative in your April 1990 story 'Air Pollution and Trees: Not Out of the Woods Yet.'

"However, the article incorrectly cited some of our findings. In our study, it was ozone, not acid rain, that affected pine growth. Acidic rain alone either did not affect tree growth or, in some cases, resulted in better growth. This is primarily due to the fact that acidic rain contains more nitrogen, which is limited in our Southern forest soils.

"This does not mean that acidic rain will prove beneficial to forests over years of exposure."—Susan Medlarz, program manager, Southern Commercial Forest Research Cooperative, Raleigh, N.C.

Make It Pounds

"The article 'Simple Soil Test Saves Money,' May 1990, refers to 'units' of nitrogen. This is technically incorrect. It has become popular to refer to pounds as units, but I hope you will help stop this practice. A unit of plant food is defined as 20 pounds, or 1% of a ton. When pounds is meant, authors should say so."—J. Paul Lilly, Plymouth, N.C.

FROM PAST ISSUES

100 Years Ago—1890

- A farmer living in the vicinity of Marshall, Mo., fired at a crow that was stealing eggs from his barn. He killed the bird, but the burning wad from his gun set the barn on fire, completely destroying it.
- Sick headache attacks can be prevented if those who are subject to them are careful about their diet and largely restrict the same to vegetables and fruits easy of digestion. They must forego meat, cheese, pastry, beer, and wine.

In fact, such people should neither eat nor drink anything which is stimulating in character and at all likely to tax the digestive organs.

- For laying hens, there is nothing better than a liberal supply of milk. A pan of warm milk every morning