

An Encounter With the Healing Christ
Carol Ball*

On a dull gray Dallas morning in November 1997 the grand ballroom of the Hyatt Regency hotel was filled with a warm, bright, encompassing light. It wasn't a light produced by the ballroom fixtures, nor one that could be physically seen. Rather it was felt and experienced from within, yet was just as real as if it had been tangible. The unexpected events of that morning could not have been predicted by the more than two thousand American Association of Christian Counselors (AACC) delegates gathered from around the globe at a plenary session of the World Conference. The designated speaker that morning was the President of Compassion International. He was to challenge our thinking on poverty as we wrestled with the conference topic of "Christian Counseling in Partnership with the Local Church and the World Community." After a time of joyful worship and introduction Dr. Wesley K. Stafford stepped to the podium to begin his address. This tall, dignified, impeccably dressed man began to convey his passionate concern for those caught in poverty in the third world. His words were initially forceful, calm and confident. There was a hesitation, followed by a pause and then the unexpected happened. The Spirit of the living God unequivocally moved in our midst.

Somewhat tentatively Wesley began to share at a deeper personal level. He had been unexpectedly summoned to Florida to testify at a Disciplinary Board Hearing of a mission organization held the previous day. He switched gears. He had spent his childhood summers as the "only white boy" in an African village on the Ivory Coast where his father was a missionary. There he felt accepted and that he "belonged." It was in this setting that he came to understand poverty at its grass roots. The rest of the year he attended boarding school with 80 other boys whose parents were in the mission field. Wesley lowered his head, his voice dropped, and his tone changed. At school he and the other boys experienced "every kind of abuse known to man," physical, emotional, and sexual, enduring numerous weekly beatings. He went on to share how he was required to send a weekly letter to his parents saying how "happy" he was, as it was impressed upon him and the other boys the importance of "not jeopardizing the significant work their parents were doing for God." None of them had spoke out until recently. At the previous days' hearing several of the men shared details of their boyhood experiences in the presence of their former abusers. Wesley's voice quivered.

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This had been a wrenching emotional experience for him. He faltered. The accused had flatly denied the testimony of those who had risked breaking their silence. He could not go on speaking. His pain was palpable to each person in the ballroom. There was a hushed silence. Tears quietly ran down this dignified man's face as he stood alone before the microphone.

The hush was broken as a lone female voice rang out from the back of the ballroom. "IT WAS NOT A LIE! WE BELIEVE YOU!" Instinctively and instantaneously the counseling professionals came to life and sprang to their feet. Applause erupted. As the deafening clapping filled the ballroom, Wesley began to sob. The applause escalated. As it went on, and on, Wesley's sobs intensified. Layers of emotional and spiritual pain, buried for years, were released. Gary Collins (at that time the AACC president) moved to the podium. This relatively shorter father-figure stretched his arm around the shoulders of this hurting son, and as silence descended quietly began to pray. Over 2,000 hearts joined in intercession, awed by the gentle presence and tangible power of the Holy Spirit. As the prayer time ended applause erupted again. Wesley hugged Gary, dried his eyes and straightened his shoulders. As he made eye contact with the audience a rueful grin spread across his face and his eyes twinkled. "The Lord knew I needed the help of a counselor today, but did he have to give me 2, 497 of you....?!"

When the laughter died down, Wesley was able to deliver his prepared address with power, vigor and eloquence. As he left the conference later that day his comment to Gary was, "This morning I walked into a ballroom filled with strangers. This afternoon my heart is filled with gratitude as I leave a family." He had encountered the healing Christ when he had least expected it, and was changed by the experience. So were those of us who were present. Our hearts were "strangely warmed." Just as surely as if we had been on the road to Emmaus the living, comforting presence of Jesus had been with us. In the power of the Holy Spirit we had become the Body of Christ to a brother in pain. The next day, we, too, would leave the conference changed by the experience, and, just maybe, be a little less surprised when we unexpectedly encounter the warmth and power of God's light in the dull gray days of our counseling lives!!