

RECYCLING LIVES

THE STORY OF THE CHURCH ON THE RUBBISH DUMP

By Marcus O. Throup
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“ ...Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong...” (1 Co. 1:26-27)

For Simea

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The story of the church on the rubbish dump

Preface

Grounds for hope...

- 1. HOLY GROUND – *Worship on the rubbish dump?***
- 2. STONEY GROUND – *Threats and frustrations***
- 3. HIGH GROUND – *The battle belongs to the Lord!***
- 4. GOD’S GROUND! – *Testimonies from the Living Water’s Mission***

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Marcus Throup

Recife, May 2006.

Dean of the SAT-PE (Anglican Theological Seminary – Pernambuco, Brazil)

revthroup@yahoo.com.br

Preface

Jesus Christ was crucified and died at the city rubbish dump. Golgotha was disease ridden and filthy, a place to be avoided; a place best kept “out of sight, out of mind”. God can work miracles in unlikely places. In one, the rubbish dump of Olinda, Pernambuco, North East Brazil, we have witnessed the power of God break strongholds and change lives.

In October 1993, Brazilian pastor Reverend Simea Meldrum, founder of the Living Waters’ Mission, received God’s calling upon her life to visit the city rubbish dump, where a growing community eked out a perilous existence in misery and despair. There God spoke to her: “take off your sandals – this is holy ground.”

Since that day an entire community has been touched, a church established, and the lives of hundreds transformed by the awesome movement of the Spirit of God in a dark, forgotten, and even despised corner of the world.

This book tells the story of how God “recycled” the lives of Brazil’s urban poor.

GROUNDS FOR HOPE...

1. HOLY GROUND

Worship on the Rubbish Dump?

In 2000, I came to Brazil, fresh out of university, to work with street children. Rev. Simea Meldrum of the Living Waters' Mission drove us down a hectic, dusty road towards the city dump. As I was pondering the benefits of air-conditioning, we pulled off the main road onto a dirt track. To my right I could see a towering mountain of rubbish and figures picking through the garbage in the searing sub-tropical heat.

Simea chattered away cheerfully while ably negotiating potholes, several mangy dogs and a few small children. Bearing left onto an impossibly uneven mud track I couldn't help but notice the crimson stains on the street corner.

"Yes", Simea confirmed, "Last night they killed a 15 year old boy here. A gang slit his throat. This is a very dangerous area", she added. Later I discovered that in an average week, four young people are murdered in this district alone.

The car struggled up a mud slope flanked by rows of tiny run-down shacks. I was disturbed to see small children playing in the mud and even in open drains. More than 70% of the city of Olinda live below the poverty line, and here on the doorstep of the Living Waters' Church, all manner of social ills are visible: truancy, teenage pregnancy, drug abuse, poor sanitation and disease.

"Here we are," said Simea. "Welcome to the Living Waters' Church!" she announced triumphantly. As I got out of the car, a crowd of small grubby, semi-naked children beamed up at me with smiling faces and inquiring eyes. A naïve young foreigner, I was both worried and astonished at how the mothers could allow these children to roam free like the stray dogs. "These are very needy children, from very difficult backgrounds," Simea explained, as she embraced one after another of the children.

We came to a whitewashed concrete wall with a small metal door. So this was the "church on the dump" as I'd often heard it called. On the outside, it looked more like a prison than a place of worship; but inside, in spite of the heavy stench of rotting waste wafting over from the nearby dump, there was a real sense of the presence of God. Simea gave me the guided tour and she explained to me how it all began.

I first came to the dump on October 16th. 1993. I'd been inspired by Archbishop Carey's book *God is Green*, and wanted to do some work with young people from church on Christian stewardship. We had heard about the families who were literally living in shacks in the middle of the rubbish dump, and we wanted to help them. The first day we went there we climbed the mountain of waste and visited the people in what for them was home. On the top of the dump we made a great circle and as well as giving out ice-cream to the many children who were living there. We had a small service with praise songs and an evangelistic message about God's love. The young people played with the children while the doctors and nurses who had come with us from the parish, were able to attend those in

need of basic medical care. I felt that God was calling me, of all places, to this place! But who on earth would want to minister in this filthy, miserable and dangerous area? Perhaps only someone who is crazy! As I wrestled with the Lord, he sent a sort of angel – in fact a drunken man, who came up to me and gave me a metal ring: ‘Vicar, this ring is a sign of your covenant with this place and with God!’ I didn’t know what to say! My eyes filled with tears and as I prayed, the Holy Spirit brought to mind God’s words to Moses: ‘Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.’ (Exodus 3:5). It felt strange at first to take off my sandals and put my feet down onto the rubbish, but I knew God was doing something in my life, and I had to obey him.

I was deeply impressed by Simea’s testimony. The Living Waters’ Mission really had begun right on the dump itself. Initially, things had been far from easy, as Simea explained: “When I first arrived at the dump, the whole thing was just overwhelming; I doubted I’d be able to make a difference. However, the great thing is that God began to work in me, and as I learned to depend on Him, I realized that as he brought new hope into my life I too would be enabled to bring the hope of Jesus to others.”

The families and young people in the church were clearly grateful that Simea had persevered and stuck to the task. During our tour of the Living Waters’ Church everyone seemed to want to greet and talk to *Pastor* Simea. Some of the people I met that day had originally lived on the dump as *catadores*, or searchers, making a living searching through waste to find recyclable materials to sell on to large firms.¹

Simea explained, “When we first got to the dump there were around 50 families living in shacks right upon it. We put together a 2-year plan of action to help these families. Although nowadays mission agencies discourage giving handouts to the poor (it can create a kind of unhelpful paternalism) people were literally starving to death back then so we had no choice.”

The team didn’t limit themselves to attending to material needs alone, nor did they separate social from spiritual needs. Since there was no disguising the fact that these desperate people badly needed Jesus, the bread of life - “*I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.*” (John 6:35), the Living Waters’ Mission always sought to preach the Word of God to those on the dump, and over the years hundreds have come to faith in Jesus Christ.

That day, as I was introduced to streams of people whose lives had been touched by God, I came to understand that the Lord had called Simea to minister to a captive people. The community based on the dump had been imprisoned by poverty and encircled by spiritual darkness, but one day, in October 1993, Almighty God sent his servant to bring the good and liberating news of Jesus Christ. The smiles, embraces and bright chitchat served to confirm that the darkness was beating a swift retreat!

¹ In this line of work, a family with at least four children (counting them as workers) would average about R\$ 30,00 per week (US\$ 9, or 7 Pounds Sterling), not enough to buy sufficient food for the family.

Simea explained to me that the dump dwellers had been abandoned by the authorities and left alone to live like scavenging animals. My mouth dropped open in disbelief as I learned of some of the terrible things that had happened there:

At the beginning of 1994, when we were making home visits, a family told us how hunger had forced them to consume human flesh – surgical waste, dumped illegally by a local hospital. I brought this fact to the attention of the church during a Sunday sermon. Unknown to me at the time, some employees from a national TV network were present in the congregation. You can imagine what happened next! Overnight it became a national and then an international scandal. Olinda became famous for what one reporter called ‘the misery that leads to the practice of cannibalism’. Following visits from journalists from several different parts of the world, a local scandal turned into what seemed like a Hollywood production. The government, which had previously said that they had no plans or financial resources to help those families, were now being pressured by the international press to take action.²

In spite of this pressure, the politicians did little to relieve families eking out their existence in the misery of the dump. In fact it was Simea and her team who managed to re-house seven of the families most acutely at risk at that time.

Given such dire living conditions, it is hardly surprising that the “cannibalism” scandal was not to be the last. To this day, dump inhabitants remember the “sweet corn scandal”. A local supermarket dumped a large quantity of sweet corn meal which had been mixed with rat poison into their waste bins. When it arrived at the dump, starving occupants grabbed the welcome free food, unaware that it was contaminated. Many were taken to the hospital suffering from severe illness. These scandals serve to highlight the persisting negligence of government authorities.

Still thronged by young people and children, Simea told me how the Living Waters’ Mission has campaigned for human rights. She explained to me then what she has expressed since: “In the middle of all these social problems, the gospel has to be understood in its entirety, principally as the ‘good news’ for all and it has to touch the roots of problems like these.”³

Again, “...The pastoral and prophetic mission of the church goes beyond individual and spiritual questions. If Christ is Lord of all human existence, it is the task of the church to pay attention to social and political issues as well.”⁴

Some from outside supported Simea’s vision. In 1997, the then Secretary General of the Anglican Communion, John Peterson, visited Olinda’s rubbish dump. Moved by what he saw, the Secretary General donated a mechanical press to the catadores which crushes and packs plastic bottles. Still in use today, the press enables the catadores to cut out the

² Ed. Paul Gardener, Chris Wright, Chris Green, *Fanning the Flame*, Michigan: Zondervan, 2003, p324. This was originally part of Simea’s talk at the 2003 NEAC Conference, held in Blackpool.

³ Ibid. p325

⁴ Ibid.

middleman and to sell recyclable plastic ready packaged to the big companies – in other words, it makes for a greater profit margin and a better quality of life.⁵

Once the former Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, visited Olinda's dump, surrounded by elite troops and official government vehicles, to see Simea's work and to meet the then Mayor of Olinda. He asked the Mayor if she was not embarrassed by such misery, and what she was doing to improve things. Her response that the situation required a "pedagogical process" did not go down well with the Archbishop, who apparently said something like: *"But we're not talking about pedagogy, we're talking about hunger."*

Even today, Simea comments on the Archbishop's "very strong prophetic presence". Later, thanks to constant pressure from the church, 120 families were taken off the dump and rehoused. It was at that time that the community itself asked for a church building where they could worship.

With a basic church building in place, the people were keen to make use of it to worship the God who had fought alongside them for justice. Consequently, various services were planned, including a women's prayer and praise service, which was held weekly.

Simea introduced basic literacy classes for adults (the vast majority of whom were illiterate) and also organized practical training sessions so that some were able to learn a trade. Initially in this *humanizing* work, courses were offered in sewing, simple tailoring, and cooking.

The congregation however, comprised just a few families at this time, and the spiritual battles were constant, for as Simea is accustomed to say: *"It's much easier to take the person out of the rubbish than to take the rubbish out of the person!"*

With one eye focused steadfastly on treating the spiritual decay, in 1999 there was an opportunity for the church to combat another form of decay – tooth decay! The Anglican Diocese of Recife donated a dental clinic to the community which was incorporated into the structure of the church building. The church was then, and in many ways continues to be, the true centre of the community, the place people frequent to restore broken hearts and spirits, but also all manner of practical problems such as broken teeth! This, of course, is consistent with the Mission's ethos and vision, whereby the work and message of God flows through all spheres of human activity, where the physical and not merely the "spiritual" receives due attention.

The more I learned about the Living Waters' Mission, the more I understood how God loves to transform impossibly dark situations by His power and love. That evening there

⁵ The arrival of the press played a big part in the formation of a co-operative of catadores, who no longer thought of themselves simply as "collectors" but as recycling agents. In 1997, with the creation of the ARO, (the Association of Recyclers of Olinda) those who worked on the rubbish dump began to do so collectively, for the common good. Then as now, the Reverend Simea Meldrum and workers such as Aaron Gouldthorpe have come alongside the leaders of the association with enormous commitment, accompanying them (via road and air) to regional and national recycling conferences, helping them to break out of the poverty cycle.

was a vibrant worship service with beautiful praise songs and dancing. A cloud of insects buzzed happily around one of the neon lights in the packed church, and I reasoned that the Living Waters' Mission was itself a light shining into the darkness, attracting all kinds of followers.

In 2002, I was back at the Living Waters' Mission, this time as one of the mission workers. In all, my wife Tamara and I spent two years with the mission, and were greatly blessed during our time there.

2. STONY GROUND

Threats and frustrations

Life in the rubbish dump is tough to say the least, and by the same token, mission there can be exacting and costly. The environment is perilous for several reasons, but perhaps most seriously of all, there is a good deal of organised crime connected with the dump. Politicians and drug traffickers vie for control of the neighbourhood, and both are prepared to resort to extreme measures to get it.

At the height of the “cannibalism” scandal Simea was warned to keep quiet and to stay out of the area. The warning came through a junior member of the government who himself had received death threats from gangsters because of his involvement in the organisation of the dump.

For Jesus’ sake, Simea refused to keep quiet and would not walk away, as she joked with me one time: “John the Baptist lost his head for this sort of thing didn’t he!”

On various occasions the Living Waters’ mission and ministry has directly and indirectly confronted and challenged the earthly powers, behind which, (we are sure) stand spiritual authorities. For example, frustrated by the complete lack of policing in the region, the Living Waters’ Mission has appealed repeatedly to the relevant authorities, and has been opposed by those who wish to remain beyond the reach of the apparently short arm of Brazilian law. Overhearing a conversation about this matter, a member of the community said to Simea, “If you speak loudly about this issue in this community, I guarantee you that tomorrow you’ll be dead.”

Nevertheless, Simea insisted on calling for better policing, though even at the present time where things are improving it would seem that the police only turn up at the scene when it’s too late. Satan’s defiance and the shadow of violence and death is a clear and constant frustration for those engaged in prophetic ministry.

At the dump, it’s fair to say that death is always knocking at the door. I mentioned that I had seen a pool of blood on a street corner on my first visit. The previous night thieves had broken into the church and stolen sound equipment and instruments. As they made their escape, they slit the throat of a teenage gang member. On another occasion, one Sunday evening, a lady wheeled her son up to the door of the Living Waters’ church in a wheelbarrow. He had been hit by a stray bullet while standing in his doorway, and despite his mother’s desperate appeals was already beyond help. More recently, a young man was executed in broad daylight and in front of church members just before a midweek meeting.

As long as the church has been present in the district drug traffickers have periodically “closed off the area” i.e., threatened residents to stay in doors, so that they can go about their shady dealings unobserved by the community. At first church members were

understandably uneasy: “Pastor, we’ll have to postpone the service today because there’s going to be a ‘touch of silence’ ”

However, no service or meeting was ever postponed and God has always protected the members and leaders of the Living Waters’ Mission.

During my time with the Mission I encountered opposition of a different sort. Directly behind the new church building was a local *Macumba* or African folk religion centre, and when preaching I often heard the unmistakable sounds of strange rituals and spirit invocations.⁶ If that in itself were not enough to put up with, hostile characters from the Macumba centre had a habit of setting tyres ablaze close to the church building purposely filling the sanctuary with toxic smoke!⁷

But threats, physical danger and meddling animists are not the only problems confronting the Mission. In the everyday task of coming alongside the poorest members of the community to show the love of Jesus Christ and help effect personal growth and the recovery of self-esteem, mission workers have experienced countless setbacks in individual cases. Volunteer Delfina Dick commented that it often feels that two steps are taken forward, but soon after, one, or even three will be taken backwards.

Delfina gave one characteristic example in 2003. A long term catador of extreme material poverty and low self-esteem arrived at church one Sunday to give a testimony from the front, to the absolute amazement of those who had been working with him for years with little sign of progress. Finally, it seemed that this was something of a breakthrough, so mission workers and church members alike were moved by the testimony and newfound courage of this normally timid man.

To the great disappointment of all concerned, however, within a week he suddenly and inexplicably entered into a deep state of depression. When he finally came out of depression and appeared to be recovering, he was hit by a debilitating illness that confined him to his bed for over a week. If it had not been for the attention of members of the church who were able to get medicines to him, the illness could have killed him.

Delfina explained: “We can be Christians but we are in the realm of darkness, we enter a realm where there are powers --- I don’t necessarily see demons in that, but, we are in an environment where darkness is reigning. I think there is a spiritual world, but the form that evil assumes here is poverty – a tool Satan uses very much.”

It seems that severe poverty becomes almost an evil supernatural force itself, and such poverty has an iron grip upon those who are held in its clutches. It can dominate the ways in which people think about themselves. For many it seems impossible to break free.

⁶ The Reverend Simea informs me that the centre was recently closed down. Amen!

⁷ Simea informed me that in Summer 2005 a group of Satanists began visiting the rubbish dump, intent on influencing the children who live in the area. While it is important not to exaggerate the power of Satan, the spiritual battle which the apostle Paul mentions in his letter to the Ephesians is as real today as it was in the 1st. Century.

Individuals with low self-esteem are often difficult to motivate, so involving them in activities which will benefit them can be difficult. It is for this reason that the Living Waters' Mission is fearful of generic and one-sided expressions, which it sometimes encounters in other (particularly Pentecostal influenced) churches, such as "*I'm nothing, God alone is worthy.*"

For many wealthy Westerners there may be great merit in acknowledging our smallness before God,⁸ but with the catadores if one is to communicate the love of God it is necessary to emphasise that we are priceless before God not worthless, given the fact that we are valuable enough for Christ to have died for us.

As Delfina affirmed: "Recyclers need to forget 'I'm nothing' and need to learn that they're of great value! Christ died for them; God put in you the ability to succeed!"

Problems with self-esteem are one source of frustration, in another not unrelated difficulty the Mission has encountered difficulties where members of the church and particularly foreign mission workers have been seen chiefly as providers. As Delfina put it, "It may be a little crude, but they look at us and see dollar signs!"

The Living Waters' Mission works very hard to break down this unhelpful image. While the Mission does offer food to the hungry (the outreach in the early years included the distribution of food parcels as an emergency measure), but they also seek to lead the poor and broken to wholeness, equipping them with the life skills they need to become autonomous dignified individuals before God. That aim is compromised where the individual becomes dependent on sporadic handouts.⁹

Today, the Living Waters' Mission offers many courses at the church, so that people can learn skills and become better equipped to find work and in turn financially independent. Courses range from carpentry and basic secretarial skills, to computer literacy and music lessons. There are also sessions about recycling, so that those still working on the dump become more knowledgeable, and learn how to bargain for a "fair" deal.

In general, however, it seems fair to say that although there is great hope, where there are threats and frustrations life and mission at the dump can be hard going on stony ground. During times of trial, workers seek refuge and motivation in the Word of God, confident that just as Ezekiel once heard how God's holy light would flood into the darkness; that into a place of death would spring new life through God's Spirit, so the Lord would bring His plans to fruition at the dump:

"This is what the Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin;

⁸ In the manner of Psalm 22, for example.

⁹ For one thing he or she loses interest in working for a living; moreover, the fact is that one cannot depend upon handouts forever.

I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord.¹⁰

¹⁰ Ezekiel 37:4b - 6

3. HIGH GROUND

The battle belongs to the Lord!

The Living Waters' Mission was built on the dual foundation of worship and justice. When God acts he does so as the God of justice blessing his people and increasing the glory of his name.

The connection between worship and justice is attested in Scripture, both in the Psalms (e.g., Psalm 96, 101:1-2, 102, 106:1-2 with verses 47-48.) and in the prophets (e.g., Hab. 1:12-17, 3:2; Jer. 14:11-12, 15:15) and in the historical books (e.g., 1 Chronicles 17:16-27). In the gospels before and after performing various miracles for the people we find Jesus often at prayer, showing again the link between prayer and praise and life changing circumstance-changing action.

Convicted that God has the power to transform and recycle lives, the Living Waters' Mission has engaged in prophetic ministry, speaking out for change. In spite of the seeming reluctance of the local authorities to intervene to help those living on Olinda's rubbish dump, God's people have preached the gospel of hope, and actively campaigned for action on the social level, canvassing support for the catadores by raising awareness of their dreadful situation.

By the year 1997 the number of families living off the dump had risen to 120. The mayor of Olinda told Simea that she should work elsewhere, since the problems at the dump were "very complex" and since the council had insufficient resources to help. Not surprisingly, Simea ignored the Mayor's advice. With some secular groups, Simea pressurized the government to transform the ungoverned refuse into a landfill tip, and technicians began to work out possible strategies which would include the removal of all the families from the dump. In due course these dreams would become reality.

Today the dump is nothing like it was in the nineties. Thanks to the cries of God's people and the movement of the Holy Spirit, the entire place has been transformed into a well-managed, relatively healthy landfill site. While there are still very poor families living in surrounding areas, children are no longer permitted to roam freely on the dump and the catadores themselves have a much safer and more dignified profession as refuse managers. In fact, a key figure in today's work at the dump is the timid man mentioned in the last chapter – he's not so timid these days!

Thanks to the work of Delfina Dick, members of the community gained access to badly needed social services. Delfina realised that many catadores were absent from state registers because they lacked the relevant documents. She wrote to the Secretary of Justice in the State government requesting civil servants to come to the community to deal with this issue. On this occasion the authorities were attentive to the voice calling for justice and

officials came and provided the documents, albeit somewhat begrudgingly as Delfina remembers. This was another milestone in the Mission's work with the recyclers.

There have also been significant advances in adult and infant education. With the aid of student teachers and young volunteers from the Living Waters' Mission, Allan Dick founded a school for the unschooled children of the catadores. Through this initiative many children acquired basic numeric and literacy skills in a friendly environment, where the "pleasure of learning" was actively rediscovered. Brazilian volunteer, Rose, used Allan's approach in religious education shifting it from a "Curriculum-centred education" to a "Child-centred education". Allan wrote in a teaching manual:

A basic distinction can be made between centring education on the curriculum (the programme) or the child. Those promoting the first approach point out that a child needs to acquire some basic abilities such as reading and writing, in order to function as a productive member of society, and that the acquisition of these abilities needs to be measured. Every child should demonstrate that he or she has acquired the abilities seen as appropriate for his or her age, in order to go on to the next level of learning. Hence we have grade systems, and, often, written examinations and other tools.

On the other hand, those who are for a child-centred approach would say that each child is unique and has unique needs. Each child has areas of strength and areas of weakness and will not learn at the same rate in all subjects. The programme should therefore be designed to allow each child to advance at his or her own pace in each subject. A child may well be in second grade in math, for example, but in fourth grade in writing... The teacher must adapt his or her approach and evaluation to the individual child.¹¹

This concern to meet children in their present conditions and to help them move forward is compatible with the larger concern of the Mission, where community transformation is understood to result from the transformation of individual lives. Real transformation occurs only where there is real love, and it has been the priority of mission workers to show the very real love of Jesus to those living in brokenness.

The partnership between the Mission and the dump community in the school project did more than benefit the children. In an unprecedented way the work of Allan and Rose opened the way for a greater integration of the community in church life and vice versa. One occasion which stands out to my mind was the Good Friday service held in the recycling area of the ARO in 2003 when to the delight of those present, Allan's pupils did a theatrical re-enactment of Christ's passion, costumes and all! Before the founding of the community school this would have been unthinkable.

Given these and other such triumphs and with a growing church, it is perhaps unsurprising that the work of the Living Waters' Mission has been recognised by key Christian leaders. In 1998, for example, when Anglican bishops met at Lambeth the then Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, chose to show the Mission's work to the conference. Held up as an example of holistic, evangelical, life and community transforming mission, the Living

¹¹ As far as I know, the manual remains unpublished.

Waters' Mission won the admiration of the bishops as an inspirational model. For Simea this was a sign of hope after a spiritual wilderness experience.

Simea recalls that on several occasions God has brought to her attention His covenant with Abraham where it is promised that he shall be blessed and in turn shall be a blessing to the nations. Simea has long sensed that this Abrahamic element of being blessed and in turn blessing the nations is a part of God's plan for the Living Waters' Mission.

This sentiment has been echoed by many of those who have come from abroad to visit the mission. John Peterson, for example, perceived the global significance of the work of God in Olinda, declaring that: "The work of the Living Waters' mission is an icon for the Anglican Communion".

One church minister from the Episcopal Anglican cathedral of Memphis has compared the work at the rubbish dump to that of the special communities founded in Iona, and Taizé, inferring that: "God chose this place to speak to the world."

On another occasion, a deaconess from Lincoln, encountered God in such a personally significant way at the dump, that she was able to discover new direction for her work in England, stating: "I need to return to my church in Lincoln and get to work – because here we have seen the heart of God!"

For those of us who have experienced even a little of the work of the Living Waters' Mission among the urban poor of Brazil, it has been possible to glimpse something of the heart of God. There is no doubt in our minds that God has chosen this dark and unlikely place to speak to the world about his love, his justice, his salvation, his grace and his mercy.

It is no mere ideal: God has separated for himself a place which he has designated "holy ground", and upon this ground the Reverend Simea Meldrum and others have responded to his call in reverent fear. Where people had known only material and spiritual poverty, through the power of the Gospel there are now real grounds for hope.

The high ground of God's victory is not only about physical transformation. Through the work of the Living Waters' Mission lives have been transformed by the love of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. If there is any doubt regarding the depth of spiritual transformation which is happening in the dump community, one need only read the next chapter, where the testimonies of the young people speak for themselves!

4. GOD'S GROUND

Testimonies from the Living Waters' Mission

“Because of the oppression of the weak and the groaning of the needy, I will now arise, says the Lord. I will protect them from those who malign them” (Psalm 12:5)

When I first visited the Living Waters' Mission in 2000 I was moved by what I saw. The smiles and hugs from small children, the warm handshakes and embraces from adults, and the vibrant worship songs to God all seemed to tell the story of true transformation.

Like a bright nightlight, the church was shining out the message of Jesus into the darkness and many were coming forward out of the shadows to walk in His beautiful radiance. Five years later it is clear that in the power of the Holy Spirit God recycles lives.

Describing the process of spiritual growth which the Living Waters Mission has witnessed within the dump community, Simea once commented:

“For the tree to grow and be fruitful the soil has to have nutrients. In our society the “lies of Satan” fester in the soil, and the tree that takes them in is poisoned, becoming infirm and deformed – that is, in our society the poor very often believe the lie and therefore don't believe in the chance of transformation. We however, have to fortify our soil with truths so that our trees may grow and bear fruit – that is, we have to make sure that the people are nourished, we have to make sure that they are receiving God's principles so that they may live a godly life and bear spiritual and wholesome fruit.”

The rejection of the lie and the nourishment of the truth of God are nowhere clearer than in the spiritual growth of the young people of the Living Waters church. As Christians, as school and college students, as employees, as sons and daughters, in spite of the fact that they tread through fields which Satan has scrupulously mined, the young people of the Living Waters' Mission are some of the greatest, sturdiest and most courageous warriors for Christ that one could hope to meet.

Though practically imperceptible today, every single one of the forty strong youth group comes from a tremendously difficult emotional and spiritual background. Indeed, in a place where prostitution, teenage pregnancy, alcoholism, drugs and unemployment are typical, it is clear that the Holy Spirit of God has effected real transformation in the lives of these young people. Understandably, youth work in the mission has not always been easy. Simea, myself, Allan Dick, Aaron Gouldthorpe and others all know of the frustrations involved in trying to communicate God's truth to disorientated, disorganised and unmotivated youngsters, as they once were!

In early 2002, Brazilian volunteer Rose came to the Mission following a dream in which she saw herself working in a place with masses of refuse. In the dream, at times she fell into the rubbish, but to her astonishment she was always raised up again completely clean. In less than three years, Rose forged links with the community and largely through her work God has transformed the children and young people of the church, bringing to them new hope, life and purpose in Christ. Rose soon discovered that one or two leaders who had acted irresponsibly towards the young people, failing in their lifestyle to model a true Christian example, had largely undone some earlier good work. As a consequence the young people of the church were at a low ebb spiritually, and as Rose explained to me, there was a clear lack of commitment and direction with regard both to God and the church at that time.

Dismayed by this bleak situation, Rose felt God speaking to her: “It was at this point that God spoke about a dance-group strategy...and so, still without a name, I and three of the girls formed a group.”

From the outset Rose demanded much of the group members, impressing upon them the need to spend time with God in prayer, and the necessity of Bible reading and study. Reverting to that which early mission worker Josenaide had once taught them, Rose invested greatly in teaching the group about holy living: what in practice it means to live for Christ.

The three girls grew in faith under Rose’s spiritual direction, the choreography slowly developed, and in due course the small group made their first presentation in church. It was a great success, and within its first month the group grew from three to ten members. . In just a few months the group became a closely-knit unit, serious about God and about reaching others with his love through dance and drama. The name MISART (missions through art) reflects this express aim, and today the group are truly mission focused, having experienced first the love of God in their own lives. As Rose put it: “Our objective is to rescue from the Devil’s hand that which He has taken from us in the past, and to give it back to God in the form of praise and adoration.”

Today the group of fifteen members is extremely popular and respected in the wider evangelical community. Twice it has been involved in evangelistic work in Olinda’s famous carnival, and has worked on various occasions in the rural interior of the state of Pernambuco. On a visit to the small rural town of Umbuzerro, God performed healing miracles in response to the fervent prayers of the young people from MISART.

Additionally, the group has developed a successful work of evangelism in schools, reaching out to children with the Gospel through dance and drama, and distributing Christian literature for young people. It is evident that, as Rose explained: “The transformation which has taken place is both visible and strong. Youths who were involved with drink, drugs and premature sex have been liberated from their vices, and now live a life of obedience, holiness and submission to Christ. The growth has been so great that these young people are now becoming ready to lead other groups themselves.”

Today, MISART has a daughter group, KAIRÓS, made up of about ten pre-adolescents. KAIRÓS, in just a couple of years, has begun an effective ministry reaching both children and adults in a special way, and working together with MISART. Moreover, there is now a third group (the granddaughter of MISART!): ABBA PAI – with even younger children! It is clear that the teenagers and young adults engaged in the Living Waters' Mission are a great example to their younger brothers and sisters who are fast following in their dancing and gospel proclaiming footsteps.

Mention must be made also of the other young people in the church, who while not necessarily theatrically gifted, have grown as Christians, contributing to the life and mission of the church, with music, street evangelism, and work with small children.

Those who have recently visited the Living Waters' Mission have witnessed how the Lord is raising up a troop of elite warriors for the Gospel, each one of them with a remarkable and moving testimony. As these young soldiers advance, like arrows dispatched from the bow of the King of kings, Satan retreats – of this we are in no doubt.

It is their stories and testimonies which must now be heard. Though their identities are concealed I am grateful that they are all willing to share what Jesus has done in their lives.

R. 22 years old

My life was never easy. I came to live in Olinda in 1997 and at just 14 I had to work on the dump. My Dad was an alcoholic and my Mum couldn't get a job, that's why I ended up working there. It was a tough life and I missed out on the normal things teenagers do, like studying and playing sports. On the dump I searched for recyclable material and also for food for my family to eat. When I met Jesus things began to change. Today our family is a testimony to how God can turn things around. Praise God - my Mum is now working as a cleaner, and I have a job in a shopping centre. My Dad no longer drinks since Jesus changed his life. Also, some other members of our family came to know God. I'm a member of the MISART group and also write worship songs. The Lord is everything in my life; I thank him for everything he has done.

S. 02/05/83

Before I came to know Jesus, I suffered from depression and was always sad. My family was very poor, Mum used to work on the dump and life at home was never easy. As well as suffering from depression, I was really timid and this made it difficult for me to relate to both family and friends. I wanted this to change, but on my own I couldn't alter anything. It was when I started to go to the Living Waters' Church that things began to get better. I felt

God speaking right into my heart and realised that he was curing me. It's now five years since I accepted Jesus as Lord, and in these five years I have lived in God's presence. I'm a member of the dance group MISART, and today I can say that God has done tremendous things in my life! My family no longer lives in a shack, since we were able to build a brick house, and I'm no longer depressive or sad, and with the Lord's help I'm steadily getting over my timidity. I thank God for the church, since it was through its' work that I came to know him.

F. 01/02/88

Before I became a Christian I went through a big problem – the death of my younger brother who died aged three and a half. After his death, my family moved from Bezerros in the country to Olinda. Just two years later my parents separated. It was fairly nasty, my father was very angry and pulled down the wooden shack we had been living in. He threatened my Mum, saying: “if you put it (the shack) back together again I'll come back and burn it down with you inside” and with that, my Mum and I ended up living on the streets. When I was 11 I thought that Mum might die; they operated on her and put a valve in her heart – it was very stressful for me. Things quietened down and we were able to move into the dump community. There, in the Living Waters' Church, when I was about 11 or 12 I came to know Jesus. After a year or so I began singing in the church worship group and started to learn to play guitar. Some time later the Reverend Marcus asked me to help him on his house-to-house visits. We visited lots of people in the community, praying with them and singing worship songs in their homes – I only knew how to play about 8 songs at that time! Today I lead the worship in the Living Waters' Church.

C. 23/11/85

Everything began on the 1st. of September 2002 when Jesus touched my heart. At that time I was always out drinking with my mates, and on the day God spoke to me I had been drinking with friends. We were already drunk when I said “Today, I'm going to church”, my friends laughed but at 5 in the afternoon I was on my way to church! As I stood in the corridor I saw MISART dancing in the temple, the message really got to me and so I said to one of the young guys from the church “if pastor Simea invites us to accept Jesus I'll accept”. That young guy started to intercede for me and sure enough the Reverend Simea made an appeal. Though drunk I stepped forward and the leader of MISART prayed with me. I accepted Jesus and simply couldn't hold the tears back! Miraculously I had completely sobered up! Today I'm the leader of MISART a group which God put on my heart and is a real blessing to me; I also work in a church project which looks after street children and boys from the rubbish dump area. I dedicate my story to God and to mission worker Rose, a woman of God who helped me come to faith. Psalm 66:20

D. 23/10/84

Before I met Jesus my life was hell. At home it was one fight after the next, and I fought with my younger brothers all the time – I was very ignorant and couldn't put up with little children! I was born into witchcraft, since my Mum was a regular at the local Macumba

centres. In that environment I saw terrible things, things I hated and I felt threatened and afraid. I began to drink and became depressive – the world closed up for me. When I was 7 years old I was abused sexually and raped. That made me all the more introverted. But God loves me so much that he saved me through a friend, and today I'm very different. I love children and work as a Sunday school leader! God put this love in my heart, and he also saved my Mother; life at home is blessed now. God transformed my life, and he's currently curing and renewing me and I'm ready to serve him wherever he wants. Since God has done so much for me there is really a lot more to say, but I'd end up writing all day or more – I'll stop here! His love is great! Psalm 139

G. 1987

I'd like to begin my testimony by speaking a little about my childhood before I met Jesus. I was born in the country, in Vitória de Santo Antão, and when I was just 8 years old I went through some personal problems. My Dad was an alcoholic. He'd go out drinking and come home drunk. He used to fight a lot with Mum, and this really upset me. My Mum ended up separating from my Dad, and at that point I went with my Dad to the city where my Grandma looked after me. I missed my Mum and began to get involved with the wrong sort of people. I never got on well with my Dad and began to play truant and to sleep on the streets. A year or so later my Mum came to fetch me from my Grandma's home. My Dad got very angry and said that if I left with her I would be no son of his. Well, I went with my Mum to live close to the dump and there I was a difficult child, always fighting and dating all the girls! At that time it was one girlfriend after the next and before I knew it I'd dated all the girls in the area! Some time later, however, I came to know the church through my Mum. Enthused by what I saw and experienced I accepted Jesus in my heart and my cousin did too. For me the conversion process was slow, since I found it hard to forgive my Father. God knew all about that though, and he sent an older boy called Orlando to befriend me and pray for me. After a time, Orlando became like a Christian Father to me – he was a channel of blessing in my life and I thank God for his life. Today I am involved in leading worship and in evangelistic events.

A. 19/02/87

Before I met Jesus I used to hang out with some bad people. I was always drinking wine and other strong drinks and we used to listen to evil music. We talked a lot about demons and stuff, and ended up fighting all the time. In those days I played arcade games when I should have been at school. My parents spent all their time fighting and I was always rowing with my step-Dad. When I found God my life really changed. I stopped drinking and fighting and I became a different person all together! My Mum split up with my step-Dad and things at home improved. God gave me a great gift and today I play the drums in church. Through the church I became more responsible and my attitude to others changed, so that people in the neighbourhood began to see me through different eyes. Yes, I thank God for giving me eternal life!

E. 29 years old

Although I was brought up in a large evangelical church, in my teens I became dissatisfied with it and walked out. I fell into the New Age world, looking for help in Tarot cards, horoscopes, crystals, numerology and meditation. When this failed to satisfy my quest for spiritual fulfilment I ended up drinking heavily. Two young men helped me to understand that this way of life and the New Age were of little value to me. These men were Mormons. I became a Mormon and for eight years I studied this religion in great detail, but my heart continued empty. I perceived that it wasn't religion I needed, but someone that could cure my hurts and fill the empty space in my heart. In 1998 I was invited to a service in a local Baptist church. There I felt something like a hand reaching into my heart and pulling something out. I felt great relief and for the first time in my life I knew peace. This was no religion or church, it was somebody! I understood that Jesus Christ was giving me a new opportunity. Today, it is exactly a year since I became a member of the Anglican Church and I'm really happy here. I know that Jesus loves me and that he demonstrated this love for me on the cross. In church I teach Sunday school and love this work, and its author. I praise God for all he has done. Today I'm at peace and proud to serve him with a new heart, full of love for others and for the Word of God. God's love is very real! Amen.

E. 13/08/84

As a child I kept bad company. My Father lived among drug addicts and took me along to the places they used to hang out. What I saw there was normal for me, so I began imitating the things they did – one day I rolled up a newspaper and pretended to smoke – my Mum smacked me in the mouth! That made me think, but those things continued to be normal for me. When we moved to Olinda in 1994 some of the kids began to make fun of me. I was really insecure and one time I got so mad that I chased after a bunch of them with a knife – thanks be to God nothing happened, since he had a plan for my life. At this time the Reverend Simea was bringing the message of the Gospel to the rubbish dump. She told us that God is a loving Father and I began to question: "Is he really?" In 1995 the church organised some youth camps and I was invited. I went along and heard the positive messages but didn't accept the Gospel. Finally though, after I'd gone through all my doubts I felt that I needed to truly know this God. From that day on I've never looked back. Today I play guitar in the worship group and don't intend to abandon this God who has blessed me so much and continues to look after me!

D. 01/03/90

When I was younger I spent all my time drinking with friends. I hung around with a gang and ended up getting into fights. At home I was always arguing with my parents and brothers. My Dad was having an affair at that time and Mum used to cry a lot – this made me feel terrible. One day however, a friend invited me to church. Inside I could hardly believe what I saw, a whole load of young people praising God and dancing! To me this was a bit of a shock and when I looked at these guys it seemed as though their faces were

shining. Well, when I went home I felt something in my heart. The next day there was a youth service and I went along. Everyone was busy praying so I asked someone what prayer was. I thought I'd quite like to talk to God, to tell him all about the problems my family and I were going through – so I did. After praying I felt real peace in my heart, and when Pastor Simea asked if anyone wanted to accept Jesus I went straight up to the front and gave my life to him there and then! From that point on my life completely changed. I became a member of MISART though I soon felt that my calling was with the worship group. The changes didn't stop with me; soon my Dad accepted the Lord and my whole family began to be transformed. I'm really happy nowadays and sense that God still has many surprises for me!