MARK PRITCHARD

WELCOMING STRANGERS

ACTIVIST **SARA MILES** ON HOW FEEDING OTHERS MAKES US MORE HUMAN

Interview with Madeline Ostrander

Sara Miles never expected to find herself at an Episcopal church handing out bread, beans, tomatoes, and groceries to crowds of San Franciscans. A lesbian former atheist and journalist, Miles had for years been suspicious of church-run charities.

Then again, Miles had always been conscious of the power of food to connect people. While reporting on the mid-1980s insurgency in the Philippines, Miles remembers vividly how a family she encountered en route cooked up fish and corn gruel for her and the group of guerrilla soldiers she traveled with. "Over and over again, I was fed and taken care of by total strangers."

In 1995, Miles was living in San Francisco and happened into a service at St. Gregory's Episcopal church in the Mission District. Out of pure curiosity, she took Communion. She recognized something in that moment that resonated with her—strangers handing her bread and wine.

Over the coming months, Miles became a convert and regular church attender. When she stumbled on a pamphlet from the San Francisco Food Bank, she saw an immediate connection between her faith, her activism, and her preoccupation with food. She convinced St. Gregory's Church to let her start a food pantry.

Now, eight years later, the pantry serves hundreds of families each week. It is open to anyone and staffed

by volunteers from the communities it serves. Her work has inspired more than a dozen other food pantries in the area, and is chronicled in her book, *Take This Bread* (Ballantine 2007).

I met Miles in a coffee shop in downtown Seattle. In person, she defies labels. She is both devout and, at times, deeply critical of Christian dogma. She struck me as a radical whose activism is not tied to any particular ideology, but rather to a simple, practical fact—everyone eats. She frowned when I suggested that her faith activism might be motivated by progressive politics.

Her cell phone buzzed every few minutes. "They're trying to run the food pantry without me," she explained.

Madeline: You have said that running a food pantry is subversive. How?

Sara: In this country, people think you have to eat the right thing with the right people. In most government-run programs, you have to prove you deserve food—fill out a 20-page application to get food stamps; show your rent receipts, your utility bills, and your social security number; be a legal immigrant, a good person, upright, and hardworking.

At St. Gregory's, we don't care about that. We say there is enough food for everybody, and everybody is welcome. It's not our business to judge you or kick you out. We'll feed anybody.

Madeline: Who comes to the pantry?

Sara: Everybody. We started with 35 people, and now serve close to 600. We go through demographic waves. We were serving Russian immigrants, and then a wave of monolingual Chinese grandmothers—and I don't speak Cantonese!

Diversity is complicated. It's not like a pretty picture that kindergarteners draw. The work at the food pantry requires an understanding that people are coming for very different reasons. They have food and hunger in common.

The pantry is run by the same kinds of people it serves—people who came because they were hungry, and then wanted to help out and do something. That makes us different from a lot of other places. We're not run by nice church ladies helping the unfortunate. Our volunteers are ex-cons, meth heads, transsexual sex workers, and little old black ladies living on pensions. We have Russians, Indians, Chinese, black people, Latinos, teenagers, and old men.

Madeline: It sounds like challenging work on any number of levels.

Sara: Are you kidding? It's so much fun. It's the best thing I do all week—feeding people and listening to their stories. We unload the truck. We set up. We give away about nine tons of groceries a week. And in the middle of the day, I prepare a meal so all the volunteers can sit down together and eat. I love to cook for them.

It's not just giving people food. It's a community of people who know each other intimately. We know when somebody has a fight with their boyfriend, or when somebody goes to jail.

Madeline: You have worked with food pantries in many different kinds of churches, some more conservative than your congregation. Is it difficult to bridge those differences?

Sara: It's interesting. We're an Episcopal church. We have a gay priest. I'm gay. We have a range of political views among our members, but mostly liberal to progressive. And we work closely with the Samoan Assembly of God, a very fundamentalist congregation. But we feed people in the same way. They're not telling people what to believe, and neither are we.

Madeline: You have said Christians are united by bread. What does that mean?

Sara: Bread is the mechanism for understanding ourselves as part of one body, instead of just private individuals.

Madeline: So it's basically a way of understanding our connectedness?

Sara: Exactly, on a very basic human level.

Madeline: How has being gay affected your experience with the Church?

Sara: I don't think it's ever been an issue. St. Gregory's is probably about half gay and half straight. But I think the experience of being gay is good preparation for being a Christian. You understand that there's another world that is real, beneath the official world.

Madeline: You mean being gay prepared you for a more radical understanding of Christianity?

Sara: No, it prepared me to be a Christian, where people are willing to believe that the expected narrative of the world—in which kings and armies are powerful, and a little baby is helpless—is not the real narrative. We're willing to believe that a homeless girl could wind up being the mother of God. Christianity is about turning the norms of the world on their head, and saying, "It's not what it looks like."

Madeline: What happened to your worldview as you began to engage with and feed so many different kinds of people?

Sara: I had a great deal of suspicion »

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» about church people. The challenge for me is to try to understand myself as fundamentally like other people. And that doesn't mean that I want to be everybody's best friend. But it does mean it's not as easy for me to write off whole chunks of people. I can't say, "I could never talk to that person; that person is a Baptist, or a Chinese grandmother."

Madeline: When has your work brought you in conversation with someone unexpected?

Sara: Every week. Sitting in a van with a homeless guy who's eating pieces of American cheese and talking about St. Paul's Letters to the Corinthians. Having an old lady grab my hand and start speaking in tongues to me. Carrying a jar of somebody's ashes out of the mortuary in the parking lot in Daly City with the transsexual with AIDS whose husband just died. There are a million things I didn't plan to be doing, and I am incredibly grateful for all of them.

Madeline: Why grateful?

Sara: I want what anyone wants—to have more life, to see and do more, to be allowed into people's lives and not only the nice parts. To wind up sitting in the county hospital with somebody who just got into a fight with his buddies over some crack. It's real life, and I get to be there talking with him and hearing incredible stories about his childhood. It's depth of experience.

Madeline: Did you meet resistance to your work within the church?

Sara: Oh, yeah. We do the food pantry right in the center of the church, around the altar. It's a beautiful building. People were afraid, "What will happen if we open up the building to all these poor people?" People thought it was crazy.

But I said to them, "This is what you do every week at Communion. You break bread and offer it to strangers. You fed me. I was a stranger. Now I'm going to feed other people. This is the same thing."

I believe there actually is not much difference between Communion and feeding strangers. And that's what I told people at the church.

Madeline: And how did they respond?

Sara: The process of change is complicated. But I allowed people to experience something that mattered to them—to acknowledge that they were hungry, too, and had something they wanted to give.

Madeline: Now you're not speaking of physical hunger.

Sara: Well, here's what I mean. My volunteers are extremely poor, some living on the streets. They show up every Friday at 7:30 in the morning and work for eight or ten hours, because they're hungry to give something and connect with other people.

One of my volunteers is an ex-con. He had a heroin habit for years, lives very hand-to-mouth, and came to the pantry to get food. I asked him to give

SARA MILES

Volunteers at Sara Miles' food pantry in San Francisco hand out groceries every Friday. The pantry is largely staffed by people from needy communities.

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me a hand. Week by week, he took on more responsibility. Now, he's the guy in charge and runs the entire program. When we incorporated, he joined the board. The circumstances of his life have not changed, but his sense of himself as a leader is enormous. He manages 40 people every week.

Offering people the chance to give is incredibly empowering.

The people in my church aren't any different. They might have more money, but the desire to care for and feed other people doesn't belong to rich or poor. It's a universal thing.

Madeline Ostrander is senior editor at YES!

Share the Abundance

Every year, millions of tons of uneaten food in the U.S. head for the landfill. But grassroots movements, inspired by age-old traditions, are finding ways to redistribute excess food. A process called "food rescue" delivers extra restaurant and kitchen meals to those in need. And gleaning, a tradition that dates to Biblical days, shares surplus harvest from farms and gardens.

Many gleaning and food rescue projects are run by small, grassroots organizations. For instance, Community Harvest of Southwest Seattle, a neighborhood project, enlists volunteers to gather fruit from trees in residential yards so local homeowners can donate unpicked fruit that would otherwise fall to the ground and go to waste. The Campus Kitchens Project, a network of colleges and high schools in the Midwest and on the East Coast, uses excess food from school kitchens and cafeterias to make nourishing meals.

Some food banks also accept individual donations of extra fruits and vegetables from the garden. To learn more or find a project near you, contact the Society of St. Andrew, www.endhunger.org, or America's Second Harvest, www.secondharvest.org.

—Layla Aslani and Noah Grant