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Peter J. Wosh. *Covenant House: Journey of a Faith-Based Charity.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005. 288 pp. $42.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-3831-0.

Reviewed by Nicholas Rademacher (Religious Studies Department, Cabrini College)
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A Faith-Based Operation?

In this engaging study, Peter J. Wosh examines the rise, fall, and rebirth of Covenant House (CH) over four decades, spanning the period 1968-2003. Set against the backdrop of the social and cultural context of the times, Wosh analyzes the self-understanding that members had of CH and compares these ideas to the untold story that emerges as a result of Wosh's extensive investigation of primary source material, including correspondence, interviews, and other papers in the CH archives. Wosh was granted unfettered access to these archives by then president of CH, Sister Mary Rose McGeady, D.C., who commissioned the project in 1997. In light of this sponsorship by CH leadership, Wosh explains, "the organization hoped that the project might produce a constructively critical administrative history of the agency based on solid scholarship, extant archival documentation, and oral history interviews" (p. 11). Wosh is successful in creating this administrative history by necessarily narrowing his attention to leadership ("administrators and board members," p. 11) at the admitted expense of passing over the story of CH clients and those CH volunteers and employees who worked directly with those clients.

Wosh places his study within the context of similar projects by explaining that "the origins, development and growth of specific faith-based social ministries" have not been studied broadly enough for scholars to make generalizations about them (p. 3). He describes his study of CH as a response to this lacuna in the scholarship on social reform among Catholics and other faith-inspired groups in the United States. As part of his contribution, Wosh offers "several themes" derived from his study of CH that he suggests can serve as a basis for future institutional studies comparable to his own. The following three overarching themes supplement more specific themes related to the history of CH itself. These broad themes include the "ongoing tension between charismatic authority and bureaucratic institutionalization" (p. 3); the struggle between CH's "prophetic and culturally accommodationist qualities" (p. 4); and, finally, "the interdependence of social sectors" (p. 5), namely public (at the federal, state, and municipal levels) and private (specifically corporate) interests.

Wosh develops these themes through the eight chapters that comprise his book. The first three chapters focus on the personal story of CH founder Bruce Ritter and the early stages of the movement that would become Covenant House. In these chapters, we learn of Ritter's determination to live up to his own demand that others live the Gospel message by moving out of his comfortable, middle-class college chaplaincy and into an urban setting. During this nascent period, the "charismatic" and "prophetic" elements were driving what would become the CH movement; later, as the movement became increasingly bureaucratized, these two elements would take a backseat to other concerns. The development of mission or purpose was haphazard, emerging as it did out of a "ministry of availability" (p. 43), which is to say that, rather than target a particular population with a particular need, Ritter and his colleagues helped whomever they could on an as needed basis. As Wosh explains, "All accounts confirm that the notion of sheltering homeless youths emerged almost accidentally and developed to satisfy real neighborhood needs rather than in accordance with any grand preconceived strategy" (p. 51). Among the many ministries in which Ritter and his associates engaged at this time, the ministry to homeless youth became the focus. This narrowing of focus led immediately to controversy. Some associates did not want to go in this direction or narrow their focus to work with homeless youth. The ensuing attempt to arrive at a common understanding of their mission marked the beginning of the bureaucratization of CH. No longer would multiple ministries flourish. Now the movement would concentrate increasingly on a single effort while power within the movement would be consolidated in a single figure, Bruce Ritter.

In the early 1970s, not long after its inception, CH had already begun to move from a radical reform effort based in Gospel values to a domesticated social service agency. Ritter had an insatiable appetite for growth that quickly outstripped his early fund-raising efforts. Naturally he turned to corporate America by way of institutions like Chase Manhattan Bank and the advertising agency Young and Rubicam. At the same time, he was developing financial support from agencies within New York City and eventually from the state and federal governments as well. Nonetheless, Ritter continued to tell a story about CH as an anti-bureaucratic movement whose mission was to serve the poor. It is here that the reader begins to see ever more clearly the disparity between the story about CH and the actual events that constitute CH history. The increasing reliance on other "social sectors" that led to CH's growth also lurched the movement towards bureaucratic institutionalization, greater accommodation to the demands of modern social work, and away from the original prophetic stand.

According to Wosh, a real change began to occur in the late 1970s when "Bruce Ritter began to lose control of the Covenant House story" (p. 87). A number of factors led to this loss of control: the outside investors, government regulators, generally favorable media attention, and changing social and cultural trends. Ritter responded well to these pressures as the movement continued to develop. Chapters 5 and 6 document the unprecedented growth of CH in New York City, across the nation, and even beyond U.S. borders, with particular success in Central America. By now, the prophetic character of CH was diminishing even further though Ritter attempted to foster such impulses among the volunteers.

The penultimate chapter 7 deals with "The Crisis." Here, Wosh navigates the media's treatment of, as well as the internal documentation of CH's response to, accusations that Ritter had engaged in sexual misconduct with clients in his charge and mishandled financial affairs at CH. Internal investigations by CH personnel and outside investigations by hired consultants and federal investigators resulted in "internal administrative reform" that shifted CH leadership style from the charismatic approach that characterized Ritter's tenure to a bureaucratic system of checks and balances created to ensure greater transparency (p. 193). The reader must wait until fairly deep in chapter 8 to find out what happened with the charges of sexual abuse. The external evaluation found "extensive" evidence that Ritter had "engaged in sexual activities with certain residents and made sexual advances toward certain members of the Faith Community." Wosh explains that "no individual allegation could be proved beyond question" but that, quoting the external evaluators, "'Father Ritter exercised unacceptably poor judgment in his relations with certain residents"' (p. 208).

The changes made after Ritter's departure reflect the triumph of the institutional approach to social reform. Sister Rose McGeady, D.C., was chosen as the new president to succeed Ritter. She was an ideal candidate. As Wosh explains, "The new president had spent a lifetime working with children, possessed appropriate academic degrees in psychology and sociology, and operated from a professional social work perspective" (p. 200). Sr. McGeady was able to restore public confidence in CH by instituting reforms that emerged out of the professional and scientific norms of her education and experience in the social sciences. Under her leadership, "Covenant House had elected to modify its style significantly and place its internal operations more in conformity with professional norms throughout the nonprofit world" (p. 223). What little remained of the original prophetic or countercultural trends in the CH movement had been displaced by the need for conformity and accommodation so that the movement could survive.

Questions arise about Ritter's real objective as an agent of social reform because his words and deeds were so rarely aligned. He spoke the language of "anti-bureaucracy" while he fashioned an impressive bureaucracy. He wanted to foster a countercultural approach through volunteerism but proceeded to professionalize the staff. Is it the case that Ritter was ultimately more driven by self-aggrandizement than the desire to help those in need? Certainly there is a combination of both motives but Wosh's text leaves the impression that the former may have dominated.

Unfortunately in the history of "faith-based" initiatives like CH, a particular problem inevitably arises. Motivated by faith, how closely does one adhere to the demands of the Beatitudes expressed in the synoptic Gospels? Motivated by a desire to serve as many people as possible, as efficiently as possible, how does one incorporate the latest scientific advances without sacrificing commitment to the Gospel? As Wosh's study of CH reveals, the members of this community were divided time and again by this problem. The history of "faith-based" initiatives like CH seem to indicate that there is no "both/and" but only an "either/or." Ritter seems to have been of two minds: on the one hand, he maintained charismatic leadership and a prophetic posture toward culture while he developed an imposing bureaucratic structure. The tension was particularly acute for

members of CH because, his rhetoric to the contrary, Ritter tirelessly sought more funding and enlarged the movement's property holdings. External oversight of the day-to-day operations of CH grew in proportion to the extent to which the movement became beholden to private and federal funding. As board members from banks and insurance companies demanded results commensurate with their investment and as government regulators kept a close eye on the operations, CH operations had to become more "secularized." Efficiency and conformity to both the demands of private and federal overseers made a radical commitment to the Gospel message impossible. Ritter must have seen that this was happening and chose to sacrifice the one for the other.

In grappling with this seeming contradiction, attention might be turned to another "faith-based initiative"–the Catholic Worker–that started in New York City thirty years before CH. What is the relationship between CH and the Catholic Worker movement? Ritter of all people (as an educated Catholic priest engaging in social reform work in New York City) could not have been ignorant of the latter's work. In fact, Wosh points out that there was overlap among volunteers for the Catholic Worker movement and CH. Paul Frazier, who is profiled in chapter 2, is one example. Wosh explains that Ritter "kept other East Village religious institutions at a distance and never cultivated intellectual or social connections with these seemingly related endeavors" (p. 54). Such isolation underscores the question about Ritter's desire for self-aggrandizement. Wosh does not go into any greater detail about his relationship with groups like the Catholic Worker. Perhaps there is no evidence that Ritter struggled with the symbolic significance of the success of Dorothy Day's project, rooted as it was in personalism, while Ritter steered his project directly into institutionalization at the expense of radical commitment to the Gospel.

The present volume provides historians who study social reform efforts with an outstanding overview of the rise, fall, and rebirth of CH. This history provides an opportune starting point for a companion volume that attempts to reconstruct the view of CH from the other side, the "social workers and counselors" and the "individual children and clients" (p. 11). Furthermore, the book serves an excellent case study of the confusion that followed in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, a period during which reform and accommodation to culture were in tension in many areas, not only in the field of social reform. Above all else, Wosh's book highlights the need for further study of individual "faith-based" institutions and programs as well as comparative studies of present and past institutions. The choices that Ritter made are very different from the choices made by Dorothy Day, for example, who labored with her companions in the same city as Ritter and his co-workers. How do their choices, considered together, fit into the broader history of social reform efforts among Catholics in the United States? What do their choices tell us about how best to serve God's people who are in need? These and other questions remain to be answered. Wosh's study of CH provides a valuable and suggestive beginning.

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