

*Inter-Church Council For Social Service*

# New Weapon To Blunt The Edge Of Poverty

## *The Helping Hands Are Coupled With Renewal And Rehabilitation*

By W. H. SCARBOROUGH

Like a lot of organizations, the Inter-Church Council for Social Service hides a lot of function behind a name that is inadequate to describe it all.

The name is not intentionally misleading. The organization is new and is not yet fully aware of everything it will do. But unlike most groups it may never have a clearcut picture of its purpose. Human needs may be pressing, but they are not consistent, and an organization devoted to answering them can never enjoy the comfortable rigidity of one definite job. The Council reflects this. If you had to describe it in a few words, you might start with "need perceivers," but then you'd have to take into account what the Council does to fulfill what it has perceived. Rarely has a volunteer group mobilized the total resources available in a community such as this to blunt the edge of poverty in so many different ways.

### *Backstopping Official Efforts*

At the same time workers are busy rounding up household furnishings for a family whose home has burned, another group is distributing clothes to the impoverished and yet another is studying a proposal which may become the skeleton of a project seeking North Carolina Fund commitments to hack away the roots of poverty in this area. So comprehensive is the work, a number of formal agencies with budgeted public funds regularly seek the council's assistance. The Orange County Welfare Department regularly refers cases to it; the local chapter of the American Red Cross relies on Council assistance in its work, and the Federal Surplus Food program reaches over fifty families who would not benefit from it without the Council's help.

The impact of the Council's work on improved health conditions in Orange County cannot be readily measured, but patients have been treated and returned to productive life who might otherwise have died or been crippled for life.

### *Reinforcing Human Dignity*

It would be easy to confuse all this with what we commonly called charity, but charity is a misused and inadequate word that more often than not describes ill-advised and purposeless generosity. The Council has tried to couple help with rehabilitation and renewal, to make its gifts count for more than the temporary alleviation of distress. If the Council practices charity it attempts to avoid the degradation that recipients commonly feel, and to reinforce human dignity.

A gauge of the Council's success in doing this is the approval and acceptance of professional social agencies, and the close cooperation that exists between them. The agencies may have boggled at some of the Council's unorthodox methods, but they have been quick to recognize that Council work is filling gaps between available services, making services available to more people who need them and increasing the effectiveness of their own efforts. Professionals have been known to frown on amateurs dealing with public welfare, but any distrust of the Council has been laid to rest by its achievements.

### *The Simple Efforts Of A Very Few*

The origins of the Council are remote, but as a working force in the community, it has grown from the efforts of a few into the efforts of many. At first a few individuals through their own efforts attempted to collect and distribute used clothing to needy children. Others joined them, and as they did, they began to do other, vastly more complex jobs. Ultimately these loosely organized attempts were taken over by the United Church Women and expanded further. Their work could not have remained so limited, and last summer the Church Women appealed to the Chapel Hill Ministerial Association for help. The Association established the organization the work needed, and the Inter-Church Council began to come of age. Although the Council has acquired a president, a Board of Directors and four committees, its structure is tailored to its efforts—simple but effective. It has been operating in its present form since October.

As new as the Council is, it hasn't begun keeping records as fully as an established organization, but the files it has are studded with proof of its accomplishments and support for its methods.

### *The Watchword Is Rehabilitation*

In one instance the Council encountered a family of 11, ten of them children. Their home had burned and the insurance coverage was sufficient only to pay for a shell home, without water heat, or rooms. The home, standing beside the charred remains of the old one, looked as if it were destined to remain what its name implied—a shell. The amenities could perhaps be provided, but the spark of human dignity and self-betterment seemed missing. The Council's representative assessed the situation, then offered to provide a stove, refrigerator and heater, if the family itself could contribute toward the completion and furnishing of the house. Older children built partitions dividing it into rooms. The Council in the meantime had issued a public appeal for the necessary furnishings. They were donated and installed.

Today the family is on its way to self-sufficiency. The mother has found employment and is on the road to complete support of her family.

Dozens of similar instances have found their way to Council attention, but assistance in all its varied forms is a Council staple of diet. It can range from sponsorship of a patient who had no means to purchase a needed set of dentures to the collection and distribution of blankets. The essentials are provided, but they are always coupled with incentive for self-help.

### *Not A Matter Of Simple Charity*

When a needy family comes to Council attention, its Visiting Committee, under the chairmanship of Mrs. Paul Greer, determines immediate needs, attempts to supply them and maintains contact as long as necessary. Simple charity can be self-perpetuating. Council efforts are intended to last only as long as support is needed.

Another Council Committee, headed by Mrs. Clarence



**COUNCIL OFFICERS**—Some of the officers of the Inter-Church Council are, first row, left to right, Mrs. Arthur Ringwalt, executive secretary; Mrs. Clarence Heer, Driving Committee chairman; Mrs. Robert Crossen, executive director. Second row, Mrs. John Kosa,

Visiting Committee co-chairman; Charles Warren, treasurer; Dave Plessett, publicity and Community Relations; Rev. Robert Seymour, chairman; Dan Pollitt, Social Action Committee chairman; Mrs. George Clifford, Clothing Committee chairman.

Heer, has been instrumental in bringing the Surplus Food Program to needy families in Chapel Hill. Almost 200 families in Town qualified for the program, but had no transportation to the program's Hillsboro distribution point. Thirty-five volunteers pick up food parcels and deliver them to about fifty Chapel Hill families.

The Clothing Committee under Mrs. George Clifford, last year collected and distributed clothing to over 500 children and another hundred adults.

Although the Council is based in Chapel Hill, it does not flinch at traveling across large chunks of geography to do its work. It has helped one family on the far side of Durham, and other needy families in the northern part of the County.

### *The Accent Is On Action*

Lately the Council has been tackling problems which cannot be answered simply by supplying food or clothes or furniture. It has, for instance, become concerned with the problem of school children from needy families who have no school lunches. There are perhaps fifty of them in the Chapel Hill Schools, but there is no official means of providing them with what may well be the only adequate meal they will eat during the day. They don't know yet what can be done, but this and other questions are under attack by the Council's Social Action Committee, under the chairmanship of Law School professor Dan Pollitt. His committee is also prepared to help with problems of a needy family's budgeting, of finding legal assistance where it is needed, and channeling appeals for help to official agencies. From the Social Action Committee, too, may come a set of proposals which can form the basis for a request from the Orange County Board of Commissioners for participation in the North Carolina Fund's attack on poverty.

### *Breaking New Ground*

A new effort now under way will seek to mobilize a force of construction workers and contractors who will contribute labor for repairing dilapidated homes. One contractor has already volunteered a month's weekend work for the project.

The Council has produced a number of extra benefits no one anticipated; isolated efforts by individual churches have been coordinated and strengthened, the unity of all religious groups in Town has benefited from Council participation.

"This is really an ecumenical movement," said Council co-director Mrs. Arthur Ringwalt.

Council chairman Rev. Robert Seymour agreed. "We have got church-related and secular groups working hand-in-hand for the community good, not in any competitive way."

### *A Channel For Unused Resources*

Dave Plessett, the Council's liaison man for publicity and community relationships, sees another benefit: mobilization of the unused resources the Town's retired residents, many of whom actively seek a means of contributing their services but have before this had no outlet for them. A retired lawyer himself, Mr. Plessett confesses that he has rarely been busier or happier.

"The wonderful thing about this is that it's all volunteer work; it's good for retired people. We have a lot in the Council and we'd like more."

The Council is still very new. It is not too well-known yet, but already people are becoming aware of its existence and its effect. It has secured the support of merchants and businessmen who have contributed services and goods. But most significant of all, it is becoming known to the people who need it. Poverty here may never be as desperate again, because of the Council's talented amateurs.



*Mrs. George Clifford and Mrs. Lucille Elliott Distribute Clothing*



*Frank Cohan Delivers Surplus Food*

**PHOTOS BY BILL SPARROW**