



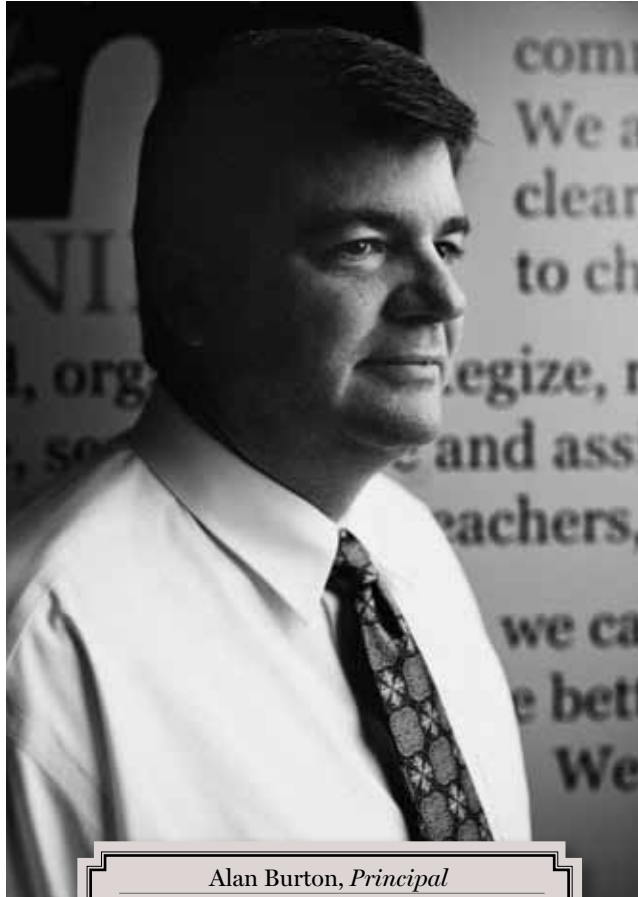
(PART FOUR IN A FOUR-PART SERIES ON SERVICE)

PIECES
OF THE
PUZZLE

In order to succeed, nonprofit organizations must meet the community's needs without duplicating one another's services.

BY LANIER SCOTT ISOM
PHOTOS BY CALEB CHANCEY

Ashley Gilbert, Executive Director
LEADING EDGE INSTITUTE



Alan Burton, *Principal*
HOPE MANIFEST

EACH YEAR, the roughly two-million nonprofit organizations operating throughout the country struggle to sustain their missions. Approximately 25,000 fail or become inactive annually.

In Alabama, the majority of nonprofit organizations—674 to be exact—are located within the Birmingham area, where there's a nexus of concentrated wealth and extreme need. As a result, many of the state's nonprofits face a number of challenges unique to Birmingham. At times, the generosity of the city's philanthropic community creates a potentially problematic scenario, one in which new nonprofits replicate the mission and services of those already established, duplicating existing programs and creating competition for funding.

Birmingham must also contend with the fact Jefferson County has 27 municipalities, which, again, means the duplication of municipal services. These political boundaries impede social change on a large scale because it is often difficult for one community to fund and see beyond the needs of its own school system, city government and municipal services.

The following nonprofits have all come into being through different processes in order to meet different community needs. While they are able to focus on a particular niche, they still face some of the challenges of funding and overlapping services that other charitable organizations face.

The question remains: Can there be too much help available? Can Birmingham have too much of a good thing in our nonprofit services?

Nonprofits are typically staffed by a committed executive director who knows his or her program well, but often may not be trained in business leadership or nonprofit management, says Allan Burton, a principal at Hope Manifest, a Birmingham consulting firm for nonprofits. He and his co-principal Todd Heifner collaborate with executive directors and their boards to train them in administrative and managerial duties.



Lauren Perlman, *Executive Director*
COLLAT JEWISH FAMILY SERVICES

To help nonprofits survive, Burton teaches one of the most important skills: the art of asking for money. “The purpose of the board is to focus on the mission and direction of the organization, and to provide resources and money for funding,” says Burton. Since the majority of gifts come from individuals, not foundations, corporations or events, he helps eliminate the misconceptions and fear surrounding requesting donations. Burton also counsels the executive director and board on how to make donor calls, meet people, look them in the eye and ask for their support.

Nonprofits thrive by creating sustainable growth. “There’s no magic bag of tricks. The executive director and boards have to do the hard work of finding people in their current sphere of connections and expand from there.” Organic growth from the current donors and board takes time and hard work, but growing in a steady manner from within is the key to success, Burton says.

One organization Hope Manifest has successfully mentored is the Leading Edge Institute, a

SURVIVAL SKILLS

nine-month leadership program for college women in Alabama, a state which fluctuates between 7 and 10 percent female leadership at the government level. (Disclosure: Lanier Scott Isom, the author of this story, serves on the board of LEI.) This spring marks LEI’s 11th graduate class, one comprised of 18 schools and 40 students from diverse racial and socioeconomic backgrounds.

From the start, LEI began with strong foundational resources and experienced early dynamic growth, says Executive Director Ashley Gilbert. But one of the things Hope Manifest teaches, funding, remains a work in progress. “Today in our maturity, we should be a membership-driven organization, but it will be three to five years before our first alumnae will be in the position to be significant supporters. So for the time being we have to rely on supporters who believe our mission is important enough to give sacrificially without having experienced our program for themselves.”

Some nonprofits form when they recognize a need left unaddressed by other organizations.

Collat Jewish Family Services had its beginnings in the early 1980s in the back room of the Birmingham Jewish Federation, offering volunteer rides to seniors. In 1989, the agency started its Buz-A-Bus Transportation program, which today provides 4,000 rides each year in a handicap accessible van.

CJFS embodies a basic tenet of Judaism: *tikkun olam*, repairing the world, one person at a time. They serve approximately 1,500 people annually, more than half of whom are not Jewish. The majority are senior adults, and the agency provides programs and services which enable them to maintain their independence and improve their quality of life.

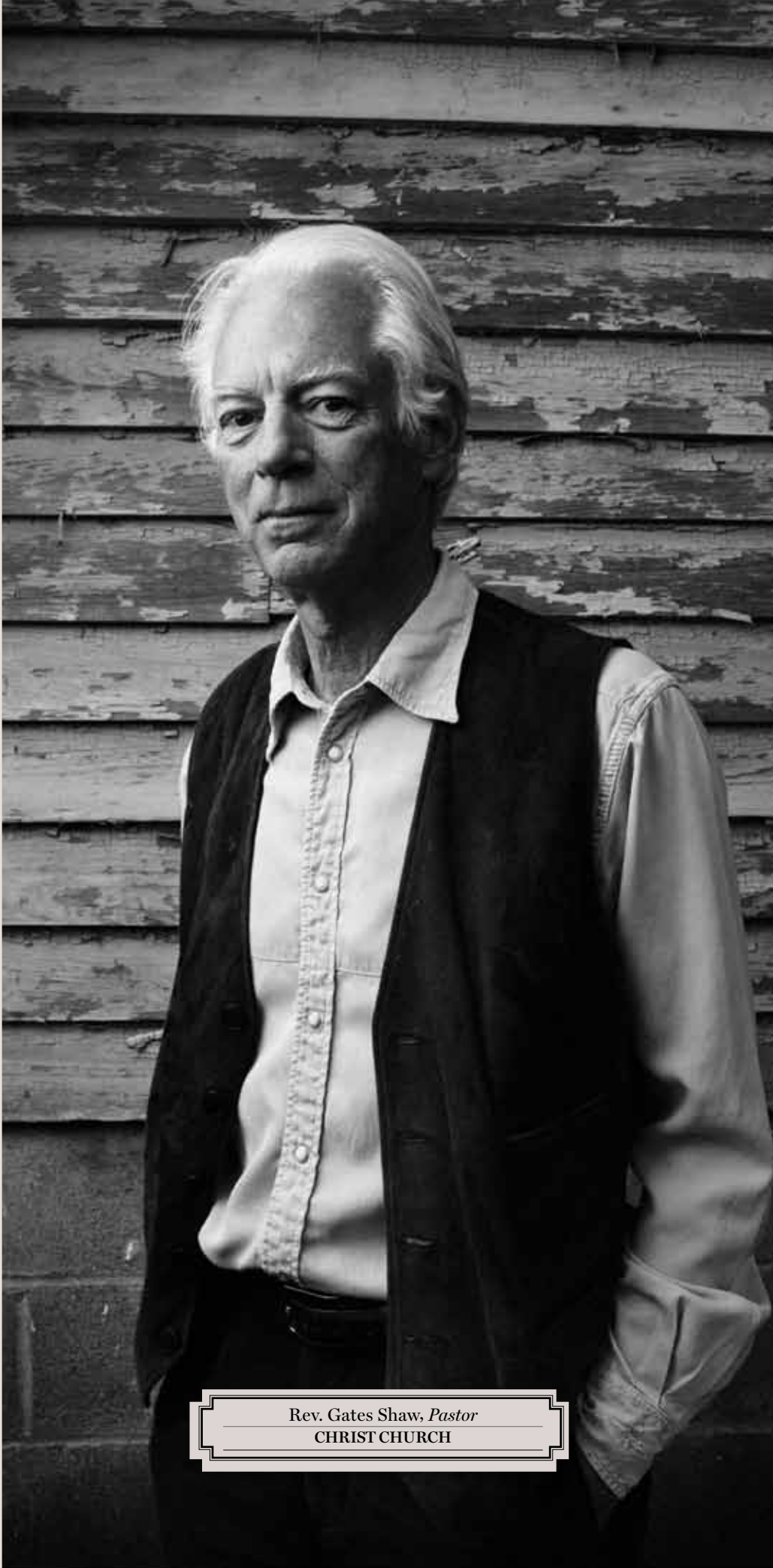
Executive Director Lauren Perlman sees the senior population’s increasing needs firsthand. “People are living longer. Many outlive their families or have family who live in other cities. CJFS currently has eight clients who are centenarians. They each live independently and want to continue to live in the community. We support them and their families to make that a reality,” Perlman says. CJFS does the “big littles,” activities most of us take for granted: laundry, meal preparation, transportation to doctor’s appointments and coordination of care.

Certain segments of the population can be easily overlooked just as certain neighborhoods can easily be forgotten. Founded in 1910, Fairfield, a company town built by U.S. Steel, was considered a model city. But during the 1970s, when U.S. Steel laid off 21,000 workers, white flight ensued and urban blight set in.

When the Rev. Gates Shaw became the pastor at Christ Church 16-and-a-half years ago, Fairfield was visibly worse for the wear; abandoned homes littered the streets, more than half the high school students were dropping out of school, almost as many only read at a fifth-grade level, Lloyd Nolan Hospital had closed and the murder rate was one of the highest of the surrounding municipalities. Without good jobs and thriving retailers, sales tax revenue or funding for city services dried up.

Fairfield, a company town built by U.S. Steel, suffered when the company laid off 21,000 people in the 1970s. Now, the Rev. Gates Shaw established City Works: The Fairfield Initiative Community Development Corporation in an effort to renew the neighborhood.





Rev. Gates Shaw, *Pastor*
CHRIST CHURCH



FILLING THE GAPS

In 2001, with a vision to renew the neighborhood, Shaw established City Works: The Fairfield Initiative Community Development Corporation, a collaboration of more than 16 charities, foundations and churches. One charity, Team Nehemiah, was inspired by the biblical prophet whose vision was to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem so the exiled could return to their city.

City Works began the process of rehabilitating Fairfield by purchasing dilapidated houses to renovate in order for people to reinvest in their neighborhood. In doing so, they tackled practical considerations such as outdated city ordinances. “We have to work together to fix a broken system. We work in conjunction with one another to put our fingers in the holes in the dyke,” Shaw says. “The process of urban renewal is putting the neighbor back in the hood.”

If no one knows his or her neighbor, there’s not a neighborhood, Shaw explains. “People have to feel they matter, and you don’t matter if you can’t even sit on your front porch. Just like Ralph Ellison’s ‘Invisible Man.’ He no longer existed even to himself, so how can someone fight for something if he doesn’t exist?”

Raising money is usually the easiest part of the process. The hardest task for a nonprofit like City Works, once the framework for renewal is intact, is to raise social capital among the Fairfield community, to support and to energize people to act on their own behalf. When the practical considerations are addressed, you have to teach people to avail themselves of the means to salvage a once-vibrant community says Shaw. “Outsiders can only provide relief, but the resident population must alter the direction of its future.”

Birmingham’s future depends on nonprofits meeting the needs of the greater community. In order to do so, services cannot continue to be duplicated and artificial political divisions cannot render one neighborhood invisible to another. Only then can we repair Birmingham, one person at a time. ■