

# THE ASCENT™

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**Jacob's Ladder™**

**Community Development Corporation**

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## Come Up Higher...



### Close Encounters of the God Kind

A REFLECTION BASED ON THE  
WORK OF REV. MARK TROTTER  
by REV. WILLIAM D. MARLER  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Most of us have impressions of injustice burned into our minds. This was true for one of the patriarchs in the Old Testament. His name was Moses and his encounter with God in the burning bush has relevance in today's society. What does it say to us?

What happened at the burning bush in Midian began in the slave houses and pyramids of Egypt. Moses' family were illegal immigrants who migrated into Egypt because there was no food in the land. When Moses' ancestors moved to Egypt, there was a huge sign over it which read "give me your tired, your poor, your hungry". That is what his ancestors were... tired, poor and hungry. They did what any group of people would do in their circumstance...they moved to a place of supposed prosperity so they could participate in the wealth of the society. The Egyptians tolerated them until they got too numerous, then they took the sign down, enslaved them and put them to work building storehouses - making bricks.

But Moses, who was raised a prince of Egypt growing up in Egyptian courts, saw the suffering of his people. He was outraged over the injustice of their bondage and instinctively struck out in anger, killing a guard. Moses then fled for his life, crossed the Red Sea and settled in the land of Midian.

Somehow you get the impression that Moses is hiding in Midian, hoping that God will not find him, and leave him alone. The story suggests that Moses should be doing something else with his life but that he has successfully ducked and dodged and put whatever he was supposed to do out of his mind. He is happy in Midian. There is a whole long list of things he would give *not* to do what he thinks God will ask him to do. Besides, he has a wonderful life in Midian. He works for his father-in law, Jethro. He married the boss's daughter, Zepporah. His co-workers call him son-in-law. They have two children, the ideal nuclear family. One day he will inherit the farm. He will be rich. He will be the gentleman farmer...the kind that goes around in his Eddie Bauer shirt and slacks and looks like he is neatly dressed to work but never actually gets any dirt on him. He hopes that no one will disturb this wonderful life he has found. He hopes that no one will remind him of the

suffering in Egypt and the enslavement of his people, all the while He is enjoying *the good life*.

What we need to see is that his past is still with him. The injustice he saw in Egypt and tried to run away from is burned into his conscience. The only problem was the burning bush. If only it hadn't happened...but it did and it changed everything.

For Moses makes a big mistake. He tries to hide out in the open. He is out shepherding the sheep...*alone*...days' journey from anyone else - all the way to Mt. Horeb. He is on a lonely hillside, and the only sound is the wind sweeping across the valley. Then suddenly...the bush is engulfed by tongues of fire which do not consume it. He sees the fire which has been burning in his soul mirrored-back to him from a blazing bush and the voice of his conscience, which has been long-impaired, speaking to him from heaven via a bush aflame with the truth of God.

Robert Fulgum wrote a book entitled "It was on fire when I lay down on it." Some tabloid ran a story about a small town community where the fire department answered a call about smoke coming out the second story window of a house. The firefighters extinguished a smoldering mattress with a man still on it. After it was all over they asked the man how this had happened. The man replied: "I don't know. It must have been on fire when I lay down on it."

What happened at the burning bush didn't just come out of the blue. What happened at the burning bush started many years before and is the resolution of something that had been bothering Moses for many years. He can't outrun it. He can get out of Egypt, but he can't get Egypt out of his conscience.



In the outreach of Jacob's Ladder ***we are witnessing the kindling of volunteer spirits, aflame with a passion*** to answer the call of God to relieve the suffering of those persons, families and communities on the brink of falling into desolation and ruin by offering the love of Christ and neighbor. Moses' story may be where many of us are in our Christian lives. Moses had been lying on a burning mattress for years. He is not the only one...for many of us, the mattress has been on fire all the while our backs have been turned away from the heat as we hide in Midian/Memphis *living the good life*, but ***Thanks be to God...***

***One encounter with Him  
Changes everything.***

Some recent volunteers to the Jacob's Ladder ministry are from The United Methodist Disaster Relief Team. In combination with their efforts and volunteer teams already in place, Jacob's Ladder is continuing to make inroads in the Beltline community. We are placing the final touches on two more homes which have been totally renovated and are currently for sale.



**540 Josephine - \$75,000.00**  
**3 Bedrooms & 2 Full Baths**



**429 Buntyn St. - \$68,000.00**  
**3 Bedrooms & 1 Bath**

Without the dedication of time and skills and generosity of spirit offered by this wonderful group of volunteers led by new JLCDC Board Member, Byron Crain, the restoration of these homes would not be possible.

Recently, I came to know another such person of passion and conviction and he is a newcomer to the Jacob's Ladder organization. We met by chance on a hot asphalt parking lot in East Memphis. Since I believe that with God there are no chance meetings, may I say that upon sharing the vision and mission of Jacob's Ladder, the fire was ignited in him to join his talents and energies with us for this ministry.



**Steve Barlow**

Steve Barlow is an attorney, urban anthropologist and community development consultant who has been assisting me in my duties as Executive Director and our Board in the areas of strategic planning, program planning, organizational development, and grant writing. Steve has extensive experience in community development, having served most recently for five years as the associate director of the LeMoyné-Owen College Community Development Corporation ("LOCCDC"). Prior to his work at LOCCDC, Steve worked for the City of Memphis Division of Housing and Community Development and was heavily involved in several other nonprofit neighborhood revitalization efforts around Memphis. Steve recently decided to leave the downtown Memphis law firm where he was practicing so that he could develop his own consumer law and community development consulting practice. In what follows, Steve shares his impression of the status of our organization and explains his involvement with Jacob's Ladder to re-build communities. He writes:

"Jacob's Ladder Community Development Corporation is at an exciting stage of development. The Board of Directors has decided to focus its efforts for now primarily on community revitalization work in the Belt Line Community, the neighborhood that is in the shadow of the Liberty Bowl. Much of the initial planning and organizational work has been completed, and we have established an impressive track record for developing affordable homeownership opportunities, organizing neighborhood groups, and building partnerships to strengthen the community.

In 2007, Jacob's Ladder will devote resources to gathering critical information about the Belt Line Community in order to develop a more complete understanding of its assets and challenges and to move forward strategically towards community revitalization. The first step in the process will be to complete a "Neighborhood Audit" in cooperation with The University of Memphis Center for Community Building and Neighborhood Action ("CBANA") and myself as community development consultant.

The Neighborhood Audit will contain a summary of conditions and opportunities in the neighborhood, drawing on public records, Census information, focus groups and meetings with various neighborhood stakeholders. In February, Jacob's Ladder volunteers participated with CBANA to collect data on the physical conditions of the neighborhood. Over the next few months, CBANA will finalize a set of maps and tables that tell the story of the Belt Line Community from the standpoint of property conditions, property ownership and other "hard" statistical data. I will be working to collect and compile input from the residents and other stakeholders in the Belt Line Community in an effort to get a better understanding of qualitative or "soft" data about the neighborhood.

After the Neighborhood Audit is complete, the board, staff and volunteers of Jacob's Ladder and representatives of the neighborhood will develop an Action Plan for the Belt Line Community that takes into consideration key community strengths and challenges. The Action Plan, essentially the "Business Plan" for the community, will prioritize projects and programs for Jacob's Ladder to pursue and will identify key resources for the pursuit of such projects and programs. I will be coordinating the planning process and drafting of the Action Plan based on stakeholder input.

Simultaneously, while developing the Neighborhood Audit and the Action Plan, Jacob's Ladder has been busy pursuing funds to support these planning activities and to support core programs. In January, Jacob's Ladder submitted a concept letter to the Hyde Family Foundations, a previous supporter, requesting financial support to allow Jacob's Ladder to fund its planning strategy, acquire and build out a headquarters location, conduct neighborhood festivals, build in-home learning centers. Also in January, Jacob's Ladder requested and was awarded a low interest loan from the Memphis Community Development Partnership for use in our rehabilitation efforts. In February, Jacob's Ladder submitted a mini-grant proposal to the Assisi Foundation of Memphis, requesting financial support to develop the Neighborhood Audit and to fund the development of a comprehensive Master Plan for the Belt Line Community that presents a shared vision of community stakeholders for the future of the neighborhood.

Jacob's Ladder continues to pursue an aggressive community building and neighborhood revitalization agenda from a faith-based perspective, strong on relationship building and stimulating collaboration among businesses, communities of faith, and neighborhood residents. Working with residents and other stakeholders Jacob's Ladder implements creative solutions to: (i) provide safe, decent, affordable housing to low income families, (ii) expand financial literacy and homebuyer educational opportunities among low income adults living in the central city, (iii) provide educational, mentoring and life-skills development opportunities to low income children living in the central city, (iv) reconnect families, businesses, faith communities, and other neighborhood assets to each other and to the broader community through networking and collaboration building activities, (v) improve the physical appearance of the neighborhood by developing and maintaining green-spaces and by eliminating slum and blight conditions, and (vi) reestablish central city neighborhoods as communities of choice where homebuyers build equity in their homes and healthy social networks prevail."