

A Word from Mack

Fall 2014 – Vol. 19 Issue 2

Renewal still based on relationships

The year was 1934 when Arnold J. Toynbee, the British historian, published his first three volumes of *A Study of History*. His idea was to identify and describe all of the major civilizations that have marched across the face of our globe from the beginning. But Toynbee had in mind a much more bold task than collecting and straight-pinning and naming and describing those beautiful butterflies of human endeavor. Toynbee believed that by studying whole civilizations and then by comparing and contrasting them, he could develop a science that held the promise of equipping us with lessons and principles for the cause of higher living. It was a promise filled with hope.

Then in 1947 Toynbee's pictures filled the famous red borders on the cover of Time magazine. He was by far the most read and studied historian of his day, having published more volumes of *A Study of History* as well as sheaves of accompanying essays and articles.

By 1961, Toynbee's work had taken on a life of its own when the last of 12 full volumes were published. He had found that civilizations have a life-cycle. They are born. They grow. They flourish. Then they, seemingly inevitably, begin to decline, decay, and collapse. Toynbee's famous dictum on the fate of human civilization is one with which we are shudderingly familiar: "The epitaph of all civilizations," he mourned, "is suicide." Inexplicably, we destroy ourselves in a Lemming like rush across the years of time heading straight toward the cliffs of our own pride and neglect, only to crash on the "Made-in-Civilizations" crags below.

In the meantime, an American thinker was reaching his peak in influence within the social milieu in which he labored. His name was Lewis Mumford. His book, *The Culture of Cities*, showed a similar life cycle for cities as Toynbee's did for civilizations. And Mumford pointedly observed: "The greatest enigma in history is: 'Why do we keep collapsing the cultures we construct?'"

In 1981, I was a journeyman pastor sitting in my study at our West Texas county-seat cow town church. Mumford's verdict had haunted my mind for months. From a dear friend, I

had just received all 12 volumes of Toynbee's famous work. They were packed in ordinary cardboard. The cardboard was the stuff boxes are made of. What it held was the stuff dreams are made of. Within 20 minutes I read the words which changed my life. They were Toynbee's definition of civilization as "a system of relationships."

How many thousands had read those words before me? I couldn't answer. It didn't matter. All of a sudden, I was alone in magnificent isolation. I cannot adequately describe that moment. All that I can say is that it was a remarkably unifying event that brought my biblically based hopes, and dreams, and thoughts, and emotions, and resolve all together in a transcendent bridle that harnessed all that I had to be and give for the rest of my life.

I do remember thinking: "Could that be true? Is that what society is?" And instantaneously there followed: "If that is true, if THAT is what society IS, then it can be HEALED!" Questions were transformed into convictions. It was loving friendship in the life service of Our Friend living within us and loving through us that could grow a loving society that would never collapse.

Then in 1994, in the city where I was born and nurtured, surrounded by friends and more friends to come, a system called "Community Renewal" was actualized among us in Shreveport, It was a method for starting and growing and sustaining positive relationships citywide.

And now, this fall, we are marking 20 wonderful years of Community Renewal! On Oct. 30, at the historic Municipal Auditorium, we will gather to celebrate! As I have said for many years, "Anyone can count the seeds in an apple. But no one can count the number of apples in a seed!" God's love in the flesh in YOU. THAT is the hope of glory! See you there, my friend!