

Some men's vision is defined by status. But Adger McKay chose a humble path to fulfilling his heart's deepest desire.  
BY JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

# AN UNFORGETTABLE TRUE STORY OF LOVE

**E**ven after these months it is hard to believe my friend Adger McKay is gone. He died, at the age of 49, on Easter Sunday morning.

Forty-nine is too young to die. That is, unless you are willing to lay down your life for someone else.

Jesus gave his life at the age of 33. John the Baptist was about the same age when he ventured out on the limb of prophecy and had his head lopped off. Stephen was probably 31 when he preached that magnificent sermon which got him stoned to death.

None of it made much sense. Then.

In this age of materialism, with our emphasis on long life, to lose one's life while youth is still blooming on the cheeks is considered tragic. Perhaps, however, it is far more tragic to live long while living selfishly, than to live as a servant and die at the age of 49.

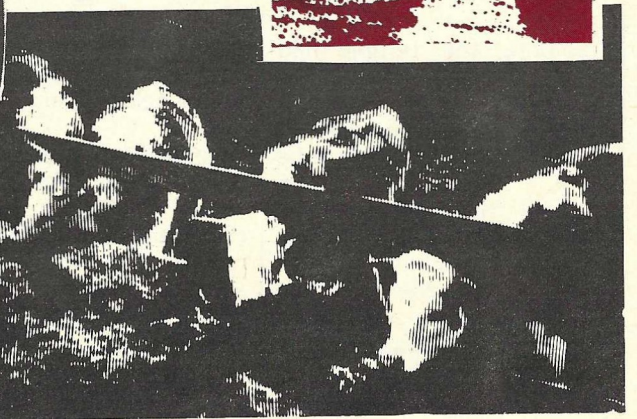
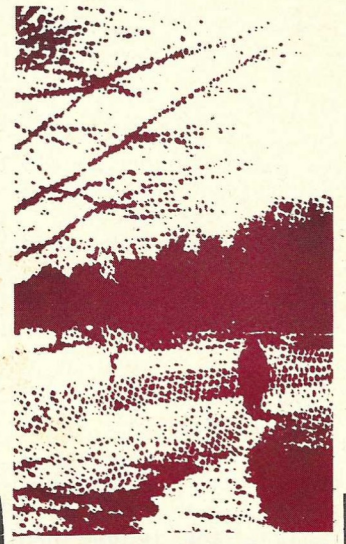
Adger McKay came from a prominent Hendersonville, N.C., family. But instead of becoming a banker like one brother, or a prosperous farmer like another brother, he chose to give his life as an agricultural missionary to the Mexicans.

He didn't last long. He was too dif-

ferent. After two terms as a Presbyterian missionary it became obvious he was a theological misfit. He talked about the power of God, praying for the sick, and believing that God still speaks to men through prophecy. It became obvious that if he stayed on he would be asked to leave.

But you see, Adger wasn't a wave-maker. All he wanted to do was serve. His first love was for those who had never heard the Gospel. But if that was denied him, then he could just as easily serve in a nation where nearly everyone looks upon himself as a leader. In fact, it's easy to be a servant in

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a houseful of masters. So, Adger left his beloved Mexico and returned to the States.

The first time I met him was during a visit with his brother Larry, who owns a farm in Hendersonville. Larry took me out to the barn and there, at the far end of a line of cows, was Adger. He was sitting on a small stool stripping udders.

*Poor guy. I thought. All those graduate degrees and there he is—rejected by organized religion because he prays in a special prayer language and lays hands on the sick. Now all he can find to do is milk cows.*

I didn't know it at the time, but Adger didn't have to milk cows. He chose to. His family was eager to help out in every way. But when a man has committed his life to serve—then milking cows, or washing feet, becomes a high and noble profession.

I had read the words a hundred times—"whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant." But I never really understood. I, too, was caught up in the American success syndrome that spiritual effectiveness is limited to those who have the fastest growing Sunday Schools, the biggest buildings, the most popular TV ministries and who record the largest number of baptisms. I mean, who ever dreamed that a cow-milker might appear on the cover of a Christian magazine, or be invited to appear as a TV talk show guest. Like most others, I thought in terms of competitive Christianity—the kind where I measured my success quantitatively against someone else who was running the same race, rather than qualitatively against the cross of Jesus.

To think that a man could bomb out as a missionary (an agricultural missionary at that) and have to return to the States and walk around in cow manure milking his brother's cows—and still be considered a success in God's eyes. . . well, that just didn't fit my high-steeple-lots-a-people mold.

Adger never complained of the way he was treated. He moved his family to nearby Montreat and lived in rented houses. He started a little Bible study in his home. Some folks objected, for it was a different kind of study than they were used to. They did more than take turns reading the Word. They actually believed God would incarnate His Word in them.

Adger ministered to the kids at Montreat-Anderson College. Some of

them caught his missionary spirit. What he could not do on the mission field, he could now do because he was home. He inspired others. They went in his place.

He traveled across the state to Greensboro, Gaffney, Hickory, Charlotte, High Point, Asheville, Winston-Salem—ministering to small groups. He was never a headline conference speaker. No one ever put his picture in the paper and said, "Adger McKay is coming to town." No big churches invited him to hold crusades. He was never invited to the "charismatic leaders conference." In a world where many are looked on as spiritual giants he was satisfied to be a servant, touching only a few lives rather than the masses.

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**A failure?**

**Well, it depends on  
your definition.**

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Jesus, you know, by all the standards of his day, also was a failure. Rejected by organized religion. Misunderstood by His own family. His tiny church had only 12 members, and one of them betrayed Him. The rest, when it seemed they might get involved, fled into the night. He was scorned by those in authority. He was never asked to speak at the Emperor's Prayer Breakfast or called upon to give the invocation at the Sanhedrin. The few times important men did seek Him out, they had to come under the cover of night so they wouldn't be seen associating with a person of such low stature. When it came time to decide who should be released from jail, the religious leaders chose a murderer instead of Him. He was executed in humiliation, and all but the few of His followers who cowered behind the rocks sneered, "Good riddance." Even after He rose from the dead the majority of the "real" world—the politicians, the religious leaders, the business executives—shrugged off the report as a fanatical rumor which did not deserve a second hearing.

"What was his name? Jesus? Oh, that crazy carpenter from Nazareth who was supposed to heal the sick.

Well, he didn't do such a good job on himself, did he? Had he been God, as he said he was, surely the priests would have recognized it. No, he was just a servant."

Just a servant.

After knowing Adger McKay, however, the word takes on new meaning.

When he was home on Sunday, Adger, his wife Ann and the family worshiped at the Presbyterian church near the Montreat assembly grounds. They sat together in a pew. Sang hymns. Tithed their money. Prayed for their pastor. Taught Sunday School. Served on committees. You would never know his denomination looked on him as *persona non grata*. He held no bitterness. He was called to serve.

During the last several years, Adger made repeated trips overseas—Africa, Europe, Mexico. Although he lived by faith—subsisting on whatever people gave him—he always had enough. On his last trip to Africa he gave away all his money to the Africans. Then he gave away his life. Some time, during those last three weeks on the continent when he preached more than 50 times in 18 days, he was bitten by a strange mosquito. He contracted malignant malaria. By the time he got back home it was too late. His friends prayed, even anointed him with oil. His Christian doctor did everything he could. He died Easter morning—at the age of 49.

A failure? Well, it depends on your definition.

Billy Graham came to the hospital personally to pray for him. His Presbyterian pastor called him a saint. When I flew up to conduct his memorial service, I changed planes in Atlanta. On the flight to Asheville I found myself sitting next to a young missionary to Mexico. They had gotten the word, somehow, less than an hour after Adger had died. They had left within two hours and had traveled for 30 hours straight from Oaxaca to attend the service.

"Adger was my spiritual father," he said. (continued on page 44)

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*An Unforgettable True Story of Love*  
(continued from page 39)

Adger McKay and the host of others like him are the forerunners of a new breed. Servants. Foot-washers. Cow-milkers. While many continue to aspire for high religious office, wearing royal purple, climbing the ecclesiastical ladder to "nation-wide" ministries, there is a-borning a generation of those who, with joy, are busy washing the feet of those for whom Christ died.

They are the light of the world—burning out for Jesus at early ages.

These servants don't have to sit in plush seats, preach in cathedrals, wear religious garb, hold ordination certificates, or even have degrees after their name. They may not even have business cards with imprinted crosses, doves or fish lending proud humbleness to their degrees, titles and/or positions. They don't have automatic typewriters and computers to handle their correspondence. They hold jobs such as carpenter, nurse, engineer, dental assistant and clerk. They do not aspire to be bishops, TV personalities, or even members of boards of directors.

They look to Jesus, not only as their

Savior, but as their example for lifestyle. And while others go about making sacrifice on the high altar in Jerusalem where they may be seen of men, they see the real sacrifice being made "without the gate." They are willing to say, as Paul did to the Hebrews, "Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach. For here we have no continuing city, but we seek one to come" (Hebrews 13:13-14).

My friend, Bob Wright, is overseer of several interdenominational churches near Annapolis, Md. He had been asking God who should occupy the places of spiritual leadership in these churches. One day they had an afternoon wedding in his backyard. A large crowd attended. After the ceremony, Bob returned to the house for a few minutes. The crowd was happily milling around the yard, enjoying each other's fellowship, when it started to rain.

Bob was standing at the window when he saw the first raindrops fall. He started to rush out and organize the men to get the chairs into the garage. Instead, God seemed to say, "No, stay here. I am going to show you the

leaders of the church."

Bob watched most of the people scamper into the house. But a few men, instead of running for safety, doffed their coats and rushed back to get the chairs.

"There are your leaders," God whispered to Bob.

In order to be a chairman, you must first be willing to be a chair-man. And a cow-milker. And a foot-washer.

In the Kingdom only the servants lead.

A lot of other people must have felt the same way. With less than two days to get the word out, and no official notice in any of the papers (who reports the death of a servant?) almost 2,000 people showed up for the memorial service in Anderson Auditorium on the Presbyterian assembly grounds. They came from all over the nation. Among the group were a number of Presbyterian pastors who considered Adger their spiritual mentor.

Long life is to be desired. In fact, it is one of the blessings of God. But when the final score is tallied, it is better to burn out than to rust out.

Servants usually die that way. But they have learned that the Kingdom of God is not of this world. The Kingdom is, in the words of neo-orthodox theology, "wholly other." It is not political, military, social or even religious. It cannot be measured or even compared with the standards of success held up by this world. It runs on principles which seem backward to what we deem sensible.

- The first shall be last and the last shall be first.

- You are allowed to keep only that which you give away.

- Whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant.

- In order to live, you have to die.

Reverse the order and you receive your reward here—as a master rather than a servant. But only a fool tries to hold on to the things God says will be destroyed. And the wise man, even though he cannot understand it, believes these mysterious economic absurdities (which are the principles of the Kingdom of God) are actually the keys to open doors to vast intangible riches and deep inner satisfactions.

Only a man of great security can wash another's feet. The insecure person cannot become a servant. He has to strive to be a master. The secure man does not have to impress people. He is satisfied to obey—regardless of how strange it may seem to others. ♪