

The Safety Net

National Church Growth Research Center

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January 1, 2007

“Rescuing”

Dear ones,

The name “Mt. Hood” was certainly in the news last month. It’s not only the place I live, it’s where there was a valiant attempt to rescue three men who had tried to climb the mountain’s treacherous North side in winter. The rescue activities were broadcast on news stations around the world. It was right out my front window, about seven miles away, but visible with binoculars. It was a tense time, and I knew a number of the men who were involved in the search.

The tragic end was no surprise here. In fact, it happens often enough that local people were a bit amazed at the extensive press coverage. Oregon is a beautiful state with glorious, but dangerous panoramas, from the mountains to the coast, to the “Oregon outback.” It seems that there’s a search going on for someone almost all the time. I don’t know what made this particular one so newsworthy. Of course we always hope for the happy endings, but are not surprised at tragedy.

Even with deep sympathy for victims and their families, the local questions also bring up issues of the danger involved for the rescuers and who’s going to foot the bill. Since most of the rescue attempts involve people who have made personal decisions to get some “rush,” there is always an element of disgust as well as sadness. *“Why do people put themselves and their families in these situations?”* is a question heard here on a daily basis.

I certainly won’t judge, and I know too well the agony of losing a family member. But the whole situation that played out over two long weeks (and won’t be over until the two other bodies are discovered) has left me with a number of thoughts about the nature of rescue activities and those who attempt them.

I haven’t been to the top of Mt. Hood, and don’t intend to go, but I operate a rescue operation at the foot of Mt. Hood on a regular basis. No helicopters, no newsmen, or white-outs. . . but some real danger and costly casualties.

At the beginning of a new year I also look back over the completed year. I had lots of people here in 2006, including almost forty during December alone. I had to turn five families away. It wasn't too long ago that December was a "down" time and I hibernated like the bears in my neighborhood. But no more. I'm not complaining, just reporting the facts.

Some of the people who come here are hurting to the extent that I protect their identities. I've had some "big guns" that have been broken and maimed to the point that they feel more like B-B guns than howitzers.

I've had other people that have gotten themselves into royal messes and they're trying to figure out some way to do damage control.

So I'm even careful whom I ask to sign my guestbook. If your name is in my guestbook it's probably a testimony that you're functioning and in your right mind. Otherwise, I wouldn't want your presence here to be used against you.

I say all that with tongue-in-cheek. But I seriously try to protect people's privacy and reputations. That's why I get people who come from situations where they could get serious medical attention from big-time counselors. But going to the experts might tend to "mark" them so they seek anonymity here.

I feel an affinity with all who come here. I've been fired, I've been stupid, I've been lied about, and I've been mistreated. But thankfully, God has used it all to weave an interesting fabric in my life. And I know that He keeps His promise, never to forsake us. So I keep picking up the pieces of those who have been broken in their climbs up the mountain. It's what I do.

What you saw on the news about last month's rescue attempts probably emphasized what Army and Air Force rescue teams did, and also our local Sheriff's department. But I'm here to tell you, that in addition to these "professionals," there was an army of volunteers who know the mountain like it is their home. It is.

There are two groups of local Mt. Hood rescuers. They have a friendly competition with each other. One group is called the *Crag Rats*, and the other is called the *Alpenees*. There are people in each group who are twenty and thirty something's, and there are also people who are past seventy. They are true saviors. I hesitate to even mention my name in association with theirs.

They are ordinary guys: farmers, electricians, teachers, and garbage-men. But they are extra-ordinary in other ways. They've climbed the mountain. They've been in danger on the mountain. And they've rescued people off the mountain. Some of their mentors have given their own lives in the process. They do what they do because it needs to be done and there's no one else to do it.

They're a rather motley crew. They've got scars and countless tales. They laugh and joke a lot. They don't win awards. And they don't get a penny for what they do. They put themselves at risk by helping others who should have known better.

But they do it.

And when it doesn't have a good ending, they grieve.

Our Sheriff told an international camera-crew that *"We failed these men,"* speaking of the climbers who died. Local people winced and asked, *"How did we fail them? We were up there looking in 100 mph winds and in -20 temperatures. Why didn't they have GPS devices, etc? What else could we have done?"*

But I knew what Sheriff Wampler was talking about. He wanted the guys to survive, and wondered what he could have done differently to save them.

I'm frankly not professional in what I do at all. Oh, I have good inventories and questionnaires. I do good intake interviews, and lay out some pretty good recovery plans. I see success in a high percentage of people I work with in helping their marriages, their ministries, their faith, and their inter-personal relationships.

But I haven't learned to insulate myself and remain aloof. When people cry, I cry with them. When they get outraged, I share their anger. I often wish that I could remain as calm and soothing as an OLD commercial character named *"Mother Tums."* No matter what happened, she would just pat people on the shoulder and say, *"There, there."* She never seemed perplexed (like me). By getting personally involved in other people's situations and feelings I don't feel that I'm very professional.

But I've quit trying to change. Sixty-eight year old shoes aren't likely to get "broken in" if they haven't already. So I just try to be me, and let God use me. I keep

striving to be like the Crag Rats and Alpeenees. I *gaze* at the mountain. I *love* it. But I *respect* it, and that actually means that I *fear* it.

Believe me when I tell you that church leadership is a risky business, and can kill you as surely as climbing the North face of Mt. Hood in winter.

But if people are daring enough to take that ascent . . . and find themselves in dire need . . . I'll do my best to help. It's my calling. I've never been so sure in my life.

Thanks to all who are supportive, and who offer endless encouragement.

In Jesus' Name,

Silas Shotwell

P.S. (Not all the people who come to Higher Ground are in trouble. Some come here to relax, to plan, to pray, or just have fun. I'm glad to have company whatever the reason. Maybe you can come this year and share Mt. Hood with me.)