

MEET

PHOTOGRAPH BY DEBRA DIPAOLO

BY CAROL TUCKER

HE'S A PROFESSOR OF

RELIGION WHO SPENDS SUMMERS

IN ALASKA IN THE COMMERCIAL SALMON

FISHING INDUSTRY AND WHOSE RESEARCH

TAKES HIM TO WAR ZONES, "FRINGE"

CHURCHES AND THE INNER-CITY STREETS.

DON MILLER

It had started as a summer lark in 1975 to make a little extra cash. Burned out from finishing his dissertation at USC, Donald Miller took up an offer to work on a friend's commercial fishing boat off the coast of Alaska. To some, the job might sound like torture: cooped up in a small boat on the rough seas of Bristol Bay near the Aleutian Islands, working day and night hauling in nets of salmon for six weeks straight, sloshing in storms and swells so strong they've been known to sink boats, bent over the catch for hours picking out fish until your back aches and your fingers go numb.

But Miller loved it – the adventure, the challenge, the risks, the physical labor, the non-stop action. It was cathartic, refreshing and a total change from the intellectual world he'd inhabited for so long.

In fact, he loved it so much that he brought his wife Lorna and their 3-year-old son and 6-month-old daughter with him the following season, beginning a pattern they have

followed for 22 summers. Miller fished on the boat for the first 10 years, then sub-contracted with a commercial fishing company to over-



PHOTOGRAPH BY DESRA DIPAOLLO

Don Miller and his dog Kvichak pause near their home in the hills of Altadena. Kvichak was named for an Alaskan river similar to the Naknek (below), where the Millers have their summer home. The barge is carrying salmon destined for Seattle.

see the operation, using his property there as a land base. Last year, the company netted 11 million pounds of salmon during the six-week season.

Don Miller's life in Alaska is a completely separate world from his life at USC, where he is the Leonard K. Firestone Professor of Religion, specializing in social ethics, and one of the most frequently published and largest research grant recipients among the humanities faculty. He typically dresses in button-down shirts and khaki pants, faithfully attends church in Pasadena and is dedicated to his wife and family.

At 51 years old, he is lean and energetic, his grayish-white hair belying his physical fitness. At home in the foothills of Altadena, he is up at 5:30 a.m. to write in his journal, then takes off on a 45-minute hike with his puppy up a nearby trail. At USC, he is teaching, meeting with students and working on his many research projects. He is always ready to jump on a new idea, or ask an astute question to guide a student. Over weekends and during vacations, he is usually working on a book or doing field research.

"Field research" for Miller is as atypical as is his summer job. It often involves visiting war zones in places like Armenia or Lebanon. His research material stems not just from books and papers, but from the streets. He has interviewed the homeless families of Los Angeles and Armenians who survived massacres, a major earthquake and other catastrophes. He has investigated radical fringe congregations to devise a new paradigm of American Protestantism. And, most recently, he has documented how religious organizations in Los Angeles are filling a void created by the loss of the welfare state.

Though his discipline is sociology, "he has never been simply a sociologist," says colleague John B. Orr, who was Miller's dissertation advisor and is now collaborating with him on a project involving the interplay of religion and civic order. Rather, Orr says, "he is a social ethicist, who utilizes sociological methods in tandem with his moral concerns."

THE VIETNAM WAR MADE H
DILEMMAS WH, IC



DON MILLER'S INTEREST IN SOCIAL ETHICS WAS born while he was a USC undergraduate psychology major in the late 1960s – the height of the Vietnam War. The war made him start thinking about the moral and ethical dilemmas which people face – a theme which runs throughout his work.

He originally began the Ph.D. program in social ethics – offered in the School of Religion – thinking his lottery number might be called for the draft. The war ended before they ever got to his number, but by that time he had become intrigued with the study of religion. “I had discovered a whole different world of religion in which people used their minds in thinking about God and other issues,” he says. “It was a very intellectually stimulating experience.”

The School of Religion offered him a tenure-track faculty position while he was still a Ph.D. candidate, the only such offer ever made to one of its graduate students. He took the job and hustled to finish his dissertation, which dealt with how to decipher an individual's moral orientation based on their behavior. “It was a neat illustration of the way he was thinking then,” says Orr. “Don was trying to model the theory that would structure his own view of sociology – to further the thinking in the field.”

Indeed, most of Miller's research projects have a moral theme, usually involving humanistic issues that stem from something personal and touch a lot of people's lives. In addition, his methodology almost always involves ethnographic research, in which he gathers material through observations and interviews with the people he is studying.

For instance, his book *Survivors: An Oral History of the*

Armenian Genocide (University of California Press, 1993), written with his wife, Lorna, grew out of conversations with her parents, who had survived the 1915 Armenian genocide. The book tells the stories of 100 individuals living in California who lost their families, friends and communities in the 1915-1923 genocide at the hands of the Turks.

He is now finishing a second Armenia project, in which he and Lorna, with photographer Jerry Berndt, are producing a contemporary oral history of the small country as it struggles through a series of major crises. Through more than 300 interviews and photographs, the Millers document Armenian survivors of a catastrophic earthquake, the massacres in Azerbaijan, and refugees facing a winter without food or fuel after the break-up of the Soviet Union. Berndt's photographs of the project have been exhibited at the Los Angeles Central Library, the Senate Office Building Rotunda in Washington D.C. and the Armenian Cathedral in New York, among other places. The Millers will go back to Armenia this spring to do some final interviewing, and the project is then headed for publication.

Similarly, Miller used oral histories of 100 homeless parents staying in five Los Angeles area shelters to explore the moral issues surrounding how the government and social service agencies deal with the Los Angeles homeless population. This resulted in *Homeless Families: The Struggle for Dignity* (with Barry Jay Seltser, senior

social science analyst in the U.S. General Accounting Office), published in 1993 by the University of Illinois Press.

Another of Miller's current projects reflects his fascination with the strength and potential of churches and other religious institutions in the Los Angeles urban community.

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He has been documenting the growing number of religious-based social service programs which are, he says, "heroically responding to the community's needs," from health care to economic development.

Known as the Religion and Civic Order Project, this is a collaboration with John Orr and Wade Clark Roof of the University of California, Santa Barbara. It began after the 1992 Los Angeles civil unrest, when the scholars sought to document the work of religious-based programs in healing Los Angeles' inner-city communities. Their research spawned "Politics of the Spirit: Religion and Multiethnicity in Los Angeles," a booklet that describes the acts of reconciliation and healing by religious institutions.

As part of the same project, Miller and Orr recently launched the USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture – funded by a \$360,000 grant from The James Irvine Foundation – designed to study and facilitate these faith-based social service organizations.

"The retraction of the welfare state, which indisputably is occurring, is creating a vacuum into which churches, synagogues and mosques are stepping in response to human need in the local community," Miller says. The center's mission is to augment that process, and try to "increase the social capital of the religious community."

It is a vision that Miller believes strongly in. "We are witnessing a variety of new types of partnerships in Los Angeles between the faith community and foundations, corporations and publically funded agencies," he says. "While churches and synagogues can never assume the role of government in addressing basic needs for income support, housing or health care, the faith community is an important contributor to the social capital of any city."

Since then, Miller, Orr and Roof have supervised interviews with some 300 religious-based social service programs in Southern California; and Miller again brought in photographer Jerry Berndt to try to capture on film the "spirit" of religion's civic role in Los Angeles. The research will be the subject of a book under contract with the University of

California Press; and the photographs have been published in a booklet – called "Politics of the Spirit: Portraits of Faith and Community in Los Angeles" – and are on exhibit at the Los Angeles Central Library through June. [A sampling of Berndt's photographs are printed on pages 42 through 47 in this issue.]

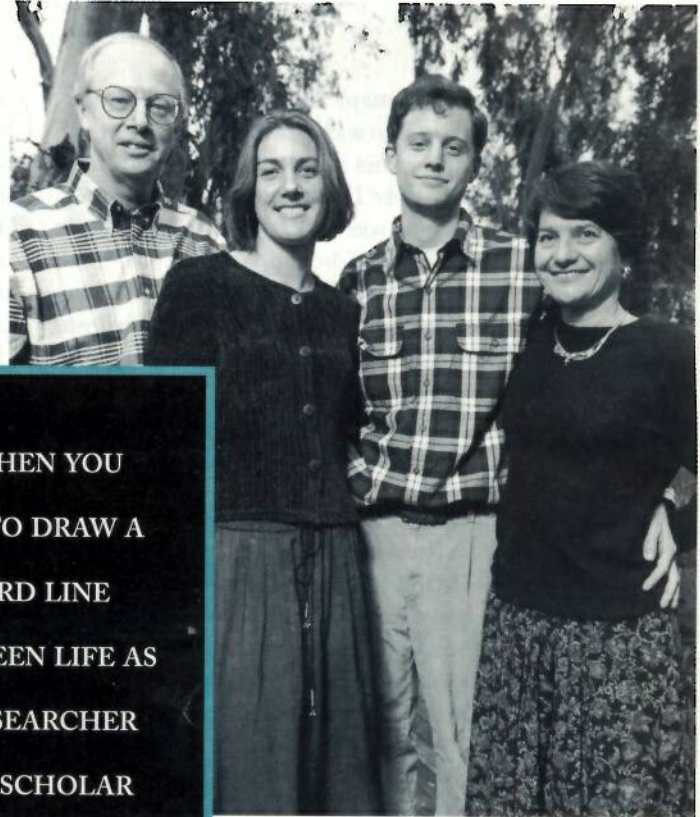
The project has been meaningful not only as research but also in a practical sense for many faith-based organizations in the community. Says Mark Whitlock, executive director of Assistance Corporation of the 12,000-member First A.M.E. Church in South-Central Los Angeles, "We must blend what we learn in the university with the street university. What Don has successfully accomplished is an integration of theory, street knowledge and practical work."

MILLER'S UPCOMING BOOK, *REINVENTING AMERICAN Protestantism: Christianity in the Next Millennium* (expected to be published this fall by the University of California Press), stems not from a moral concern but a personal one. Based on interviews and field observations, the book deals with what he calls "new paradigm churches," a resurgence of movements more akin to fundamentalism than to mainline Protestantism.

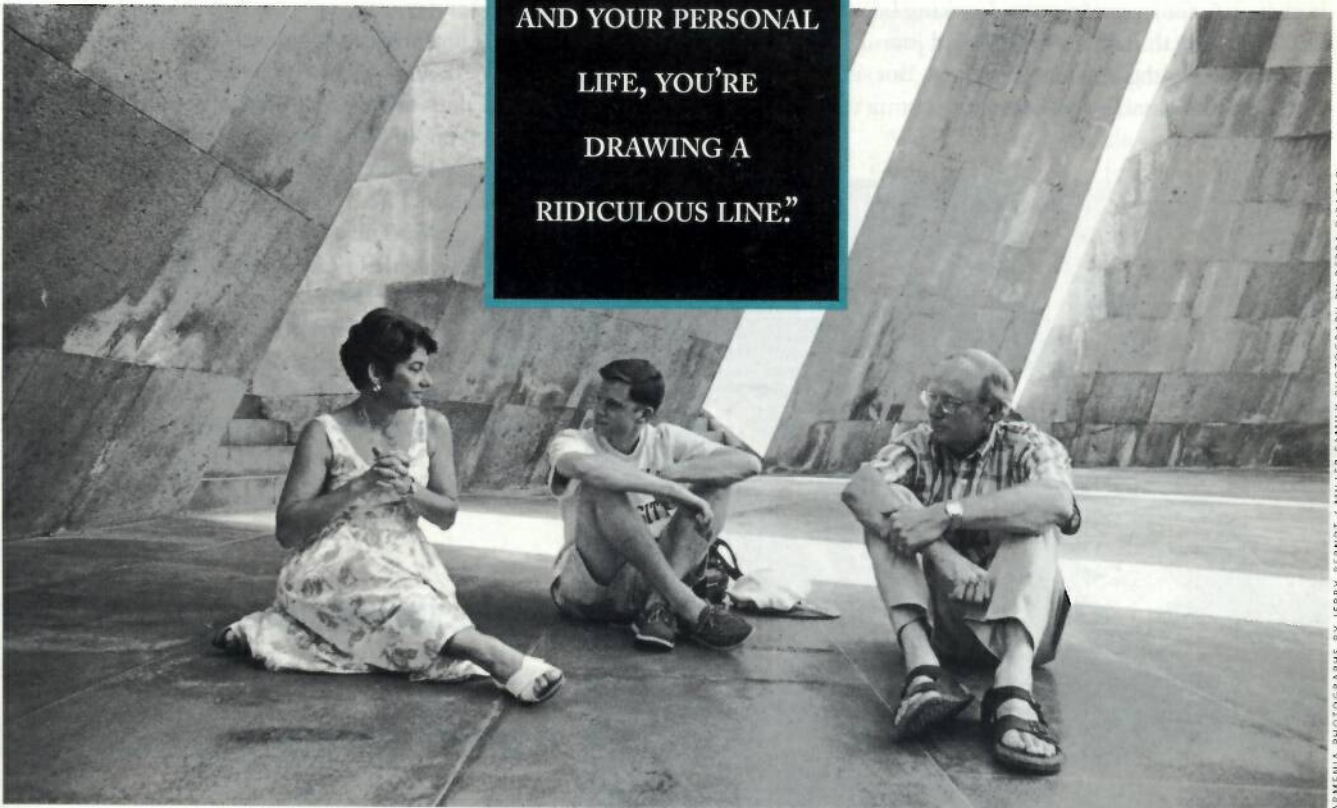
Through this research, he thinks that he may have been trying to gain a better understanding of his own family's conservative, almost fundamentalist beliefs. He broke away from his childhood religion long ago, now regularly attends All Saints Episcopal Church in Pasadena and considers himself a fairly liberal Christian. But in writing the book, he says, "I think in some ways I was – as a middle-aged adult – unconsciously revisiting my own early childhood upbringing. I spent some five years researching those groups and interviewing people as a way to look at myself."

A personal spiritual experience helped him in this search. On his 50th birthday, he decided it was time to reflect on his past and find direction for his future. So Miller, a faithful Episcopalian, checked himself into the Jesuit Retreat Center near Stanford University. The monastery was totally isolated

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ARMENIA PHOTOGRAPHS BY JERRY BERNDT / MILLER FAMILY PHOTOGRAPH BY DEBRA DIPAULO

The Miller family (top right), Don; daughter Arpi, who is a sophomore at USC; son Shont, who plans to attend Stanford Law School in the fall; and Lorna. “Shont” in Armenian means “lightning”; “Arpi” means “early morning rays of sunshine.” Don, Lorna and Shont – with photographer Jerry Berndt – spent the summer of 1993 in Armenia, interviewing and photographing survivors of a catastrophic earthquake, massacres in Azerbaijan and the effects of the break-up of the Soviet Union. At top left, Don is photographing a young refugee from Azerbaijan while Lorna tapes the interview; below, Shont is congratulated on his 20th birthday by two Armenian “grandmothers”; and, bottom, the Millers in Yerevan, Armenia, inside a monument commemorating the Armenian genocide of 1915.

and permitted no talking except for one half-hour per day with his spiritual director, who was a Catholic priest.

He had brought along his stack of personal journals, written over the last 25 years. "I was going to read them, see where I'd been, make some sort of poignant decision about where to go, and renew my life," he says.

He started reading the journals but found them depressing, as his entries usually involved something that was bothering him. He decided one night to just throw them all away. So he took a long walk out of the monastery and tossed all of the journals. Then he returned to his small, quiet room, and lay in bed staring at the ceiling.

Then something odd began to happen. Though he has never believed in the supernatural, he had an overpowering feeling that there were demons all over the ceiling.

"I don't believe in demons, but I had never had such a feeling before," he says. "It scared me, so I decided to cast them out in the name of Jesus," as he had seen people do in some of the Pentecostal services he had observed during his research of non-mainline churches. "It was the only thing that occurred to me to do," he says.

About 15 minutes later he lay in bed, feeling peaceful. When he woke up he was "absolutely blissful" and remained in that state for several weeks. Looking back at it rationally, he thinks that throwing away the old journals was symbolic of throwing out the demons of his past. But since the demons appeared to be real, he believes that casting them out "really

did take a lot of that stuff from the past and just liberated me from it."

Miller believes this experience made him more sympathetic to the non-mainline churches he was studying for his book. "I treat a personal experience like that as a way to help me understand what I'm observing," he says. "When you try to draw a hard line between life as a researcher and scholar and your personal life, you're drawing a ridiculous line. Increasingly in the social sciences and the humanities, people are not drawing that line."

THE SAME PERSONAL ENERGY AND SOCIAL CONSCIENCE

that he brings to his research infuses his work with students, particularly those in his Ethnographic Methods in Religious Research class. Knowing Miller, one should not be surprised at the offbeat nature of their research: graduate student Paul Mialovich, for example, is exploring the religious aspects of the Los Angeles theater community; Elizabeth Drexelius, also a graduate student, is looking at the ethical and moral dimensions of a popular radio station, The Beat (KKBT) 92.3 FM, and its relationship to the community. Undergraduate Yvette Lanausse is observing the ritualistic, Pentecostal-style services at St. Thomas the Apostle Church, a Spanish-speaking congregation in Los Angeles, intrigued by the catharsis she witnessed among women as they purged their souls of men who have hurt them.

"That's something Don encourages – innovation," says Mialovich. "He's really interested in expanding the conventional notion of what religious studies should be."

Mialovich also views Miller as a mentor. He was halfway through a research project for the ethnography class but was not very excited about it. Miller sensed this and encouraged him to switch topics. Then at a party, Mialovich, who directs a theater company in Claremont, told Miller his idea of exploring the connection between religion and theater.

MILLER'S CURRENT PROJECT RELECT

AND OTHER RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

PHOTOGRAPH BY JERRY BERNDT



Miller talks with Cecil L. Murray, senior pastor of the 12,000-member First African Methodist Episcopal Church in Los Angeles.



"He liked the idea. We met a few times, and the more we talked about it, the more excited both of us got about the project," Mialovich says, adding he expects the project to evolve into his dissertation topic.

Miller, in turn, draws energy and intellectual stimulation from his students. As Mialovich notes, "he really believes that education is a two-way street in which the professor learns as much as the student."

For instance, a conversation with research assistant Julie Absey triggered a whole new idea for a research project which Miller is contemplating.

"Here's a person who is prototypically post-modern, representing a Los Angeles mentality," says Miller, describing Absey. "She was born and raised Catholic, attends a Unitarian church but doesn't deny her Catholic heritage. She practices yoga and observes neo-pagan seasonal holidays."

Then Miller makes the leap to his hypothesis.

"She's prototypical because the whole notion of having some kind of uniform belief system doesn't fit any more," he says. Traditionally, if a person is a Calvinist, for example, they would follow that belief system in all aspects of their lives. But for many people, today's religious and moral path is fragmented and there is no guilt expressed about it.

By the end of the conversation, Miller was hatching plans to interview a few hundred people like Absey in Southern California, and to write about this new, prototypical post-modern religious identity.

"This is typical," Miller says. "I love to dream up these ideas and I love to get them going. I'm a seeker more than a finder – a seeker of truth."

MILLER'S FRIENDS AND COLLEAGUES ARE REVEALING in their descriptions of him. John Orr calls him a "visionary." Julie Absey describes him as "enthusiastic, driven and committed to his work." Mark Whitlock of the First A.M.E. Church offers characterizations that range from "humble" to "a saint." And Lorna Miller, who has been married to him for 28 years, spent summers with him in Alaska and worked with him on the two Armenia books, describes him as "fearless."

Take, for example, their 1993 trip to Armenia to document the survivors of the Turkish massacres, the 1988 earthquake and hardship being suffered after the break-up of the Soviet Union.

Miller wasn't satisfied with observing areas that were stabilized. He wanted to go right through Nagorno-Karabakh, an Armenian enclave in Azerbaijan which had been completely destroyed. "He has to be a participant-observer," Lorna Miller says, referring to a social science methodology in which the researcher becomes involved in what he or she is observing. "He said, 'We've got to see the people while they're surviving.' It so much enriched his experience and understanding of the situation."

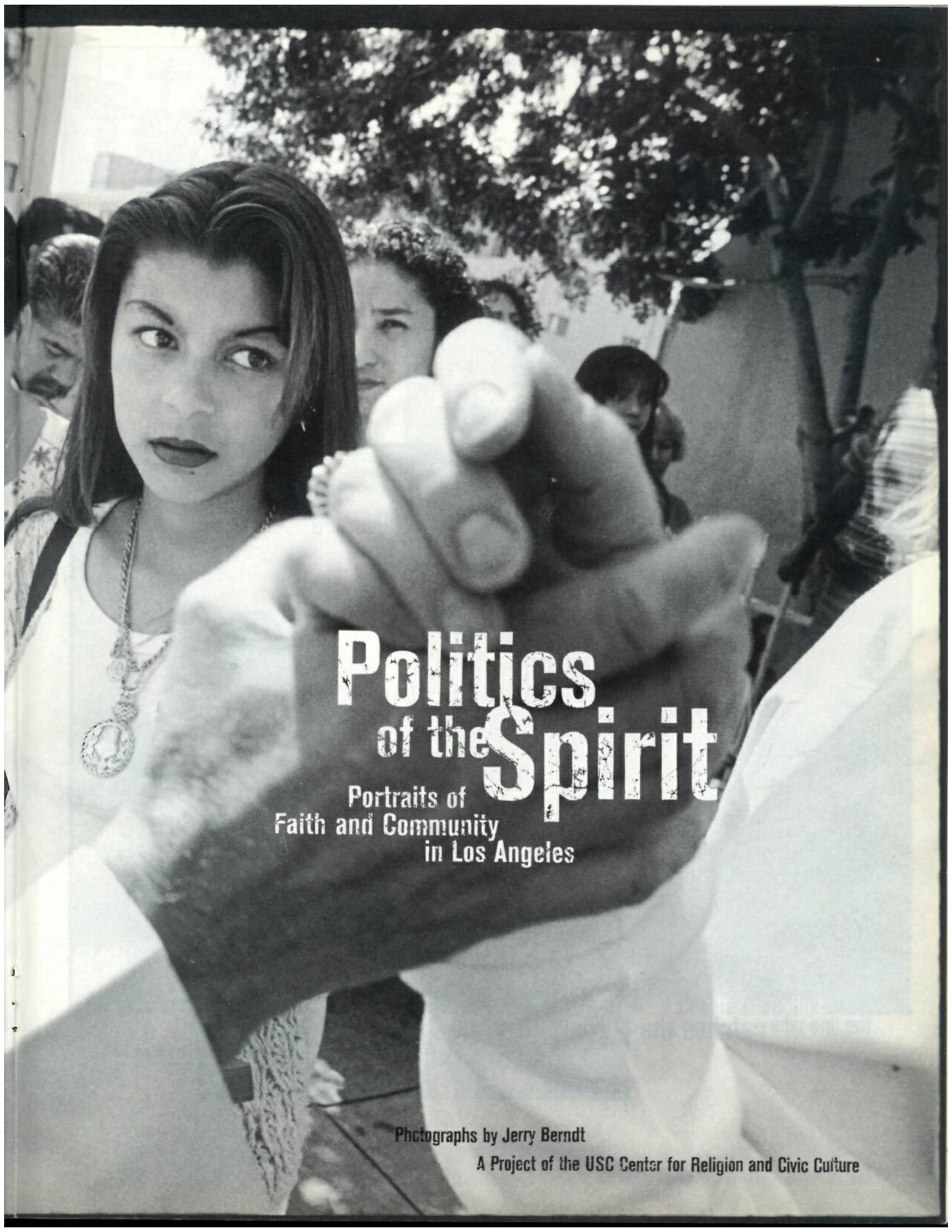
Similarly, the people he meets in Alaska – from all walks of life, but with common threads – feed into his understanding. "I think he feels that being exposed to people who are so different and face such different situations will enhance his work," Lorna Miller says.

She also believes that her husband's scholarly work feeds his faith.

"I think with all his work with people and churches, he's come around to a new understanding of spirituality and a much deeper appreciation of it." ●

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REFLECTS HIS FASCINATION WITH THE **STRENGTH** OF CHURCHES
IN THE **LOS ANGELES** URBAN COMMUNITY.



Politics of the Spirit

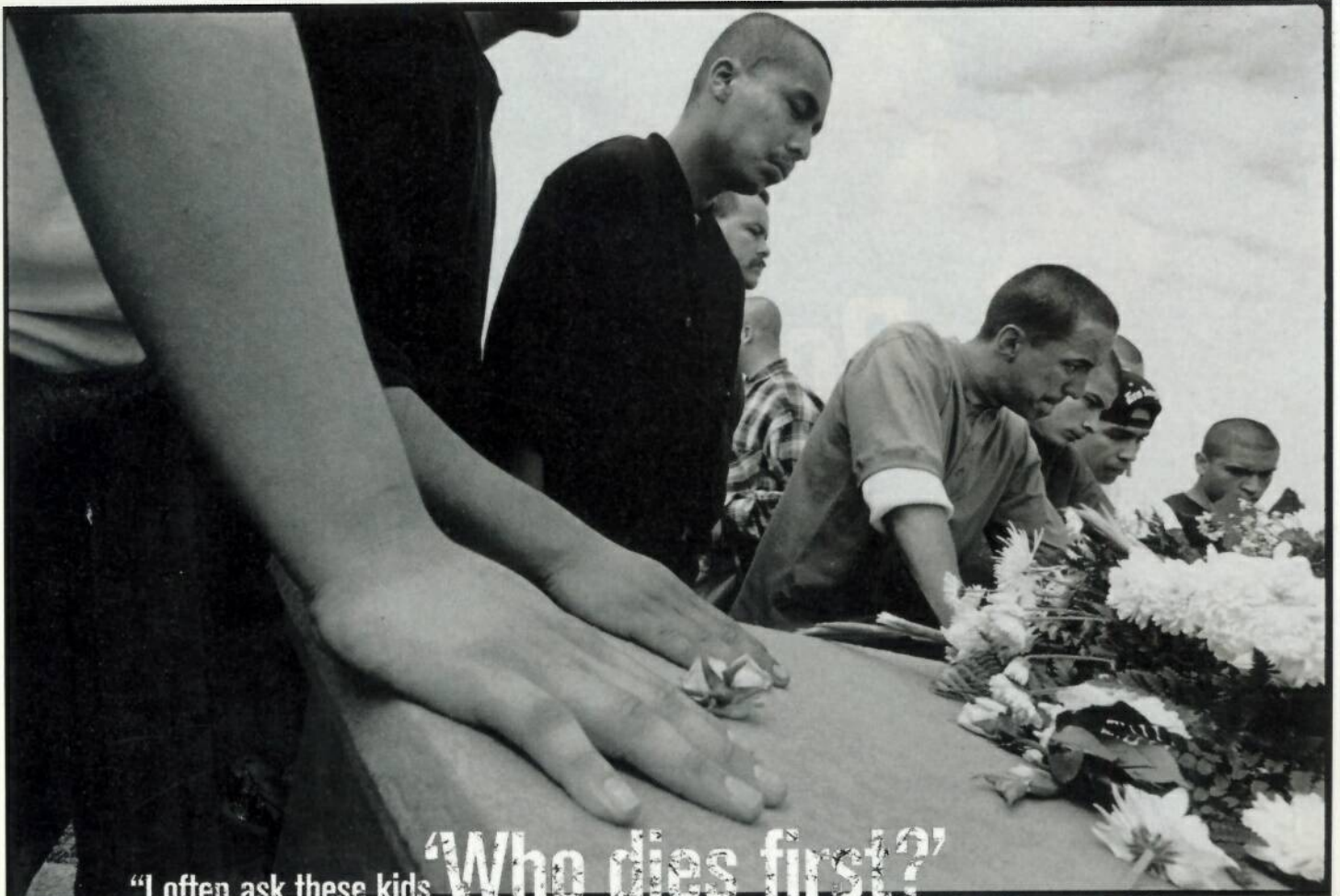
Portraits of
Faith and Community
in Los Angeles

Photographs by Jerry Berndt

A Project of the USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture

"The role of religion is to hold up the vision of human possibility"

DOLORES MISSION CATHOLIC CHURCH, LOS ANGELES

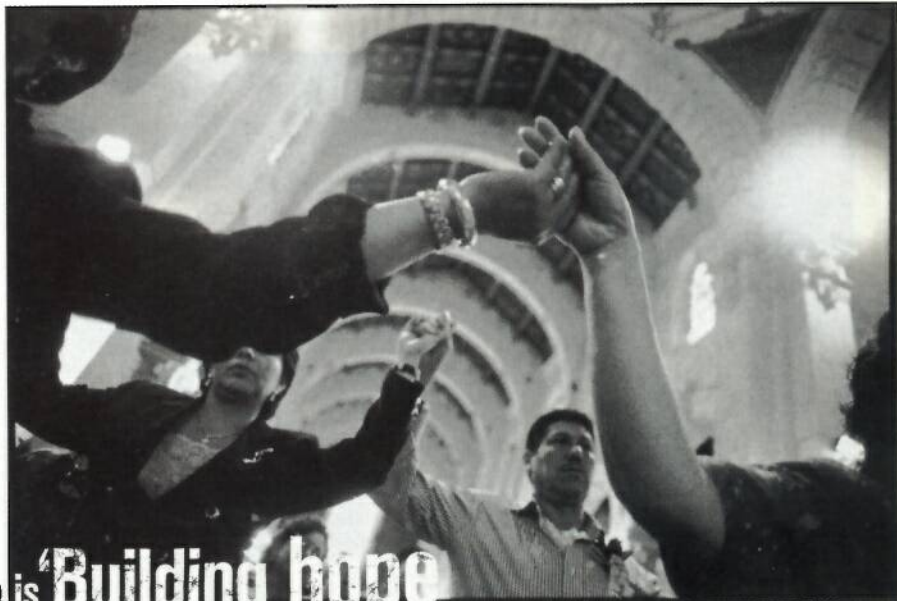


"Who dies first?"
"I often ask these kids the one who catches the bullet or the one who pulls the trigger?"
Father Greg Boyle, S.J.



COALITION FOR A NON-VIOLENT CITY, PASADENA

ESPERANZA COMMUNITY HOUSING CORPORATION, LOS ANGELES



“Our motto is **Building hope** through community.” Sister Diane Donoghue, S.S.S.

ty, week after week.”
Donald Miller



FIRST AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, LOS ANGELES

ST. THOMAS THE APOSTLE CATHOLIC CHURCH, LOS ANGELES



"The one thing that binds them together is
the faith, that's the real thing."
Father Dennis O'Neil

LAS FAMILIAS DEL PUEBLO, LOS ANGELES



These photographs are selected from *Politics of the Spirit: Portraits of Faith and Community in Los Angeles*, published in 1997 by the Center for Religion and Civic Culture at USC. Copies of the book are available for \$5; for ordering information, call Grace Dyrness at (213) 740-8562.

Jerry Berndt's photographs from this project are on exhibit through June at the Los Angeles Public Library's Central Library, 630 West 5th Street, Los Angeles, CA 90071, (213) 228-7000.

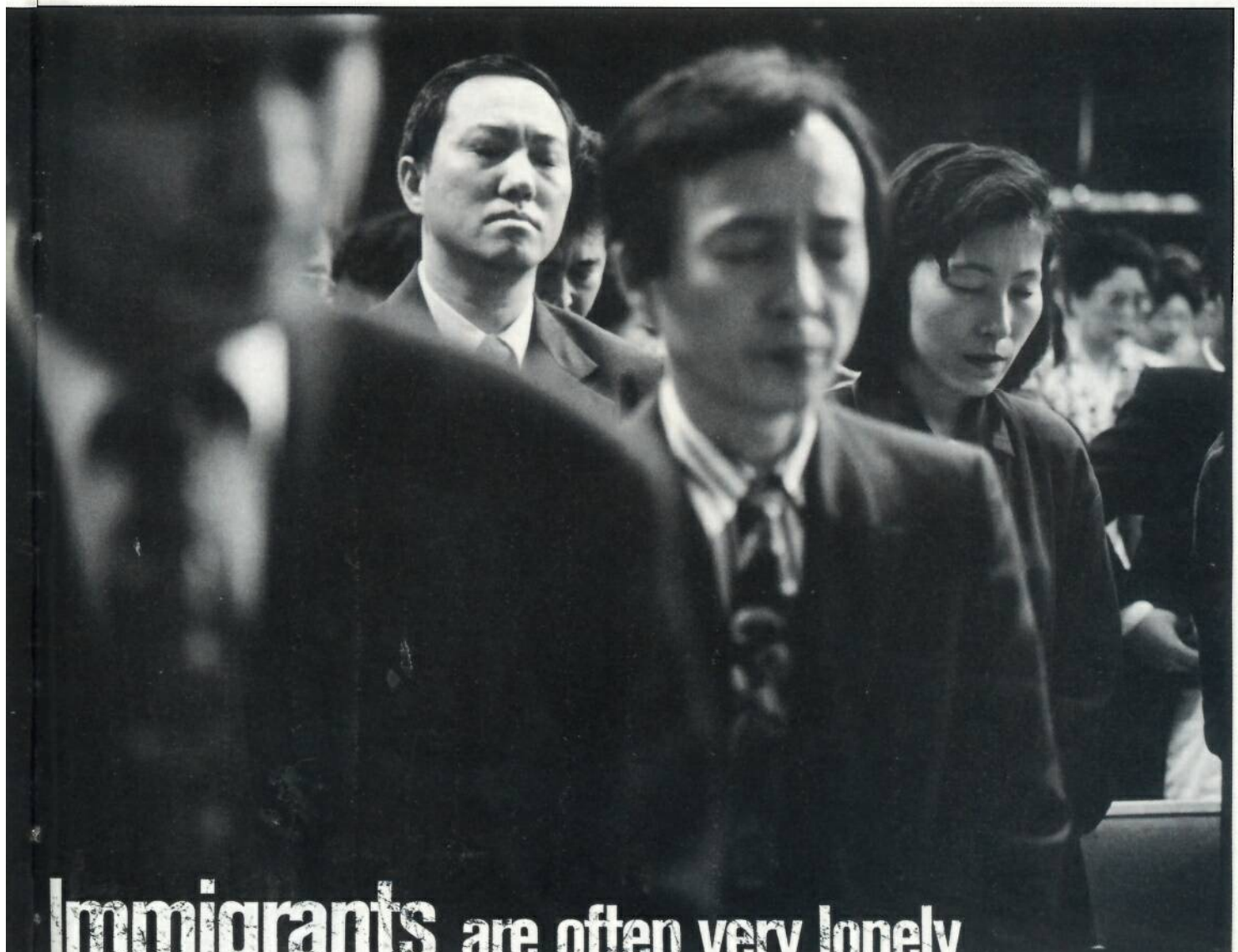


"We are in



INDUSTRIAL AREAS FOUNDATION, SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA NETWORK

THE ORIENTAL MISSION CHURCH, LOS ANGELES



Immigrants are often very lonely
e immigrants. The church provides mental, physical, and spiritual shelter.”
Rev. Daniel Kwangcheol Park