

# SENT FORTH

BY  
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HE AND HIS FAMILY HAD WORKED HARD TO PUT DOWN ROOTS IN SYRACUSE. "WHY, LORD," HE DEMANDED, "DO YOU WANT TO MOVE US?"

**P**ICTURE THIS: EVERYTHING SEEMS TO HAVE FALLEN INTO PLACE. You've got a good job and so does your wife. Your children are doing well, and you're thinking that it's all coming together. Then you're told to give it up—everything you've worked for—and move.

That's the way it was for LaVerne and me in the fall of 1983. I was working construction for my dad, and LaVerne had been offered a tenure-track position at Syracuse University College of Nursing. We had three wonderful children—ages five, three, and one—and our parents lived close by. I was happy writing music for our church, where we were surrounded by family and good friends. To top it all off, our landlord had just told me how he liked the way we looked after the place. "Ricky," he said, "I'll make you a good deal for this house and the one next door."

Everything was going great for us.

Then, one winter night, as LaVerne and I were thanking God for all he had given us, we asked for his blessing to buy the houses. But God didn't give us the go-ahead or offer counsel about the

mortgage or the new roof or any such thing. Instead, an inner voice came, saying, *If you desire to do my will, give away all that you possess and go to Peoria, Illinois, for I have a place for you there.*

Believe it or not, LaVerne and I both heard it and stared at each other. "Peoria?" I asked.

"Who do we know in Peoria?"

But then we prayed together again, and the answer came through clear as a bell. *If you truly want to be my servants, you will give away everything. I have a place for you in Peoria.*

Try explaining that to your mother-in-law. Try giving away all of your possessions—your furniture, your wedding presents and books, your wife's green Crock-Pot, your pickup and Mercury Marquis. Try meeting your friends' eyes as you tell them. Imagine having your



**BLIND FAITH:**  
*Rick and LaVerne  
gave up every-  
thing to set off for  
parts unknown.*

wife leave a good job with full benefits. Imagine uprooting your children, resigning from your church duties.

Finally I had to tell my dad—this stern, hard-working, 56-year-old man who had provided for 15 children and who now counted on me as his right-hand man. I sat in his truck and told him I was leaving the company he'd struggled to build from scratch. "If God is telling you you gotta go," he said to me, staring straight out the windshield, "then you've gotta go, I guess."

If you can picture any shred of this—how unusual and crazy we knew this must have sounded to the rest of the world—then you can glimpse some of what we went through as we packed a van with some clothes and our kids. We took \$400 with us and headed west toward Illinois, leaving our home, our family, our lives in Syracuse behind.

It wasn't easy, but we knew we had to go. And as the highway opened up before us, we sang hours' worth of songs, which helped us endure the endless hum of the tires, the jostling of tractor-trailers, and the exits' passing. I don't know quite what I expected when we reached Peoria.

Just over the town line, I pulled onto the side of the road. We had nowhere to go, really, so we sat and prayed. "We made this trip for you, Lord. Now where do we go?"

As it grew dark, LaVerne finally said, "Rick, let's find a motel. It's cold and the kids and I are shivering."

I eased us back onto the blacktop and pulled in at the first budget motel we saw. We waited there for the next three days, praying for direction. Still no response, but I reminded myself how God promised in the Bible, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." On Saturday, we paid for our final night in the motel,

then ate dinner and counted out our last twelve dollars on the dresser. We didn't have enough money for another day and we tucked the kids into bed knowing that we would have to sleep in the van the next night. As I paced the motel room and glanced at my sleeping children, a cold sweat ran down my back. Had I misunderstood God's will? Had I misled my family?

In the quiet of the night, LaVerne and I got down on our knees again and prayed more fervently than ever. "Lord, thank you for watching over us," we said. "Thank you for bringing us this far. But where do we go now? What next, Lord?"

Out of the darkness, God spoke to us again. *Go to the Christian Assembly Church. Tell them I sent you and they will give you everything you need.*

LaVerne and I looked at each other in disbelief. I grabbed the Yellow Pages from the nightstand drawer and rifled through it. The Christian Assembly Church was only two blocks from the motel! The next morning we rose early and dressed quickly to check out.

"Where're we going?" the kids asked, climbing into the van.

"To church!" LaVerne said. "Let's hurry or we'll miss the service."

With the gas needle on empty, we found the church, parked the van, and walked through the tall wooden doors. Every person in every pew seemed to turn to us—a sea of faces staring at us, not one black face in the whole congregation. If LaVerne and the kids hadn't started down the aisle, I don't believe I would have taken a step further, my pride having kicked in. I could guess what they were thinking: *What are they doing here? Who are they—some family wanting a handout?*

The preacher nodded as we slipped into a pew, then began the service, in-

quiring if there were any people here for the first time. I stood. "My wife and I are here with our children," I said and sat again. When it came time for the offering, we placed our last twelve dollars in the collection plate. As the service ended, people began filing out of the church. I bowed my head. "Lord," I prayed, "I thought you said they would help us."

Again God spoke to me. *Go and tell him what I told you in the motel.*

I rushed up to the pastor, and he told me to give the secretary our address for the mailing list.

"Pastor," I said, "we have no address. The Lord told us to come here and you would give us a place to stay. We came from New York, where I supervised the music in our church."

The preacher stepped back slightly. Then he called to those around him. "This is the family we've been praying for," he said with a terrific smile. "The new family that will bless us with their music!"

He walked us around the corner to a three-bedroom house and handed us a set of keys. In a matter of days his congregation generously gave us all the household items we needed, even a green Crock-Pot like the one LaVerne left behind in Syracuse.

We spent the next two years in Peoria, striving to be a light in a city that faced rising unemployment and increasing crime. God continued to lead us. LaVerne won a job teaching nursing, while I started a community garden and opened our house to those in need. We



**JOYFUL NOISE:** Rick directs his choir of friends and family in Syracuse, New York.

ministered in that church, grew close to the parish, and helped serve them. We had learned what it meant to trust in God, without any pride.

LaVerne and I still prayed every day, so that we'd stay on the right path. "Why are we here?" we asked. "What should we do? How may we serve you best?"

*I want you to go home,* said the Lord one day. It was time to go back to New York.

It was no easier to leave Peoria than it had been to drive away from Syracuse. We were sad to say good-bye to our new friends at Christian Assembly. But this move was different. This time we knew with an even deeper faith that we were on the right path, and that we were home wherever God sent us.

We returned to our families and our church. I resumed my music ministry and went back to work for my father and LaVerne got a good nursing job. The Lord led us to another house. I still try telling people what it's like to trust in God no matter what. And I'm not so surprised now when they seem to understand, as they did in Peoria. ■

*For more on this story, see Family Room.*

# Family Room

**TORRENCE:** *Strong family ties*

**A**fter returning to Syracuse, New York, **Rick Torrence** (*Sent Forth*, page 26) and his wife, LaVerne, founded the Winds of Agape. It started out as a children's choir and grew into a community service group serving families in need. Today, Winds of Agape operates two centers where the Torrences not only provide food, clothing and furniture but also offer training for certified home health aides. "Many of the people who take the course are young single mothers who have low self-esteem when they come in, but by the time they leave they've started believing in themselves," said LaVerne, who is in charge of the program. Rick and LaVerne, their five children and other family members have now formed their own choir. If you would like to help Winds of Agape or invite the Torrence family to sing, please call (315) 425-0547 or you can write to Winds of Agape, 505 Hawley Ave., Syracuse, NY 13203.

