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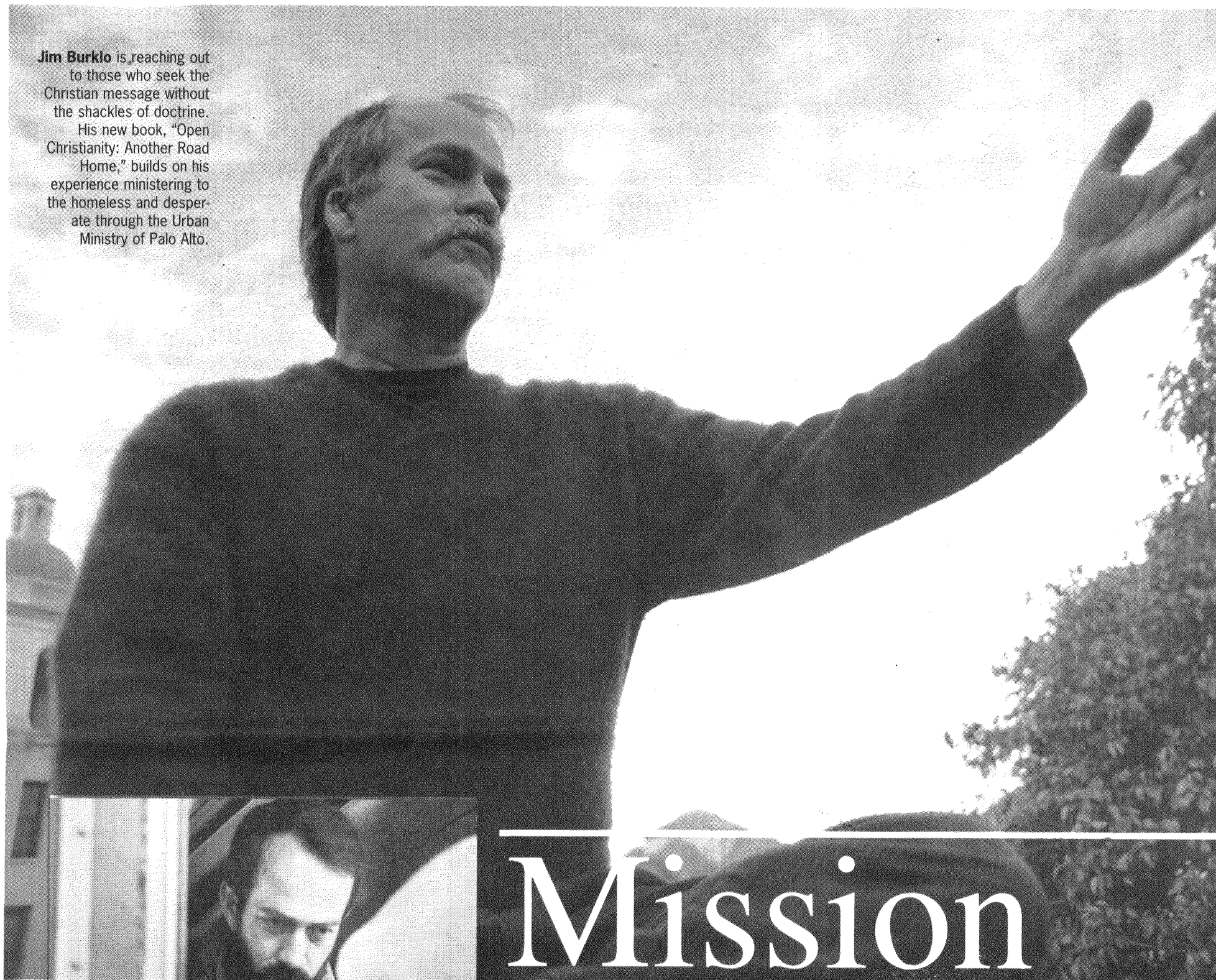
SECTION 2



► Family Almanac

The Gift: La Entrada School students host children from Haven Family House at gift-making party

Jim Burklo is reaching out to those who seek the Christian message without the shackles of doctrine. His new book, "Open Christianity: Another Road Home," builds on his experience ministering to the homeless and desperate through the Urban Ministry of Palo Alto.



Jim Burklo distributed mail to the homeless at a drop-in center operated by the Urban Ministry of Palo Alto.

Black & White photos courtesy **Jim Burklo**

Mission of *love*

Jim Burklo, former head of Urban Ministry of Palo Alto, writes about 'Open Christianity' Jesus' message to those beyond

By Marion Softky
Almanac Staff Writer

When Jim Burklo was 16, he had a revelation about a central challenge of Christianity: love your enemies.

He was on his first backpack trip, at the top of Kearsarge Pass in the Sierra Nevada. The trip leader was reading the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus tells his disciples to "love your enemies."

"I was stunned," recalls Mr. Burklo, now campus minister at Stanford, 31 years later. "I realized that it was impossible to love your enemies, but that it was the ultimate

challenge, worth giving my life to pursue."

And pursue it he has. Mr. Burklo, a resident of Menlo Park, has divided his life between being a minister and working with the poor, the homeless and people in trouble. As a founder and director of the Urban Ministry of Palo Alto, he has brought love to thousands of society's rejects, who may live along the creek, or in their cars, or behind bushes.

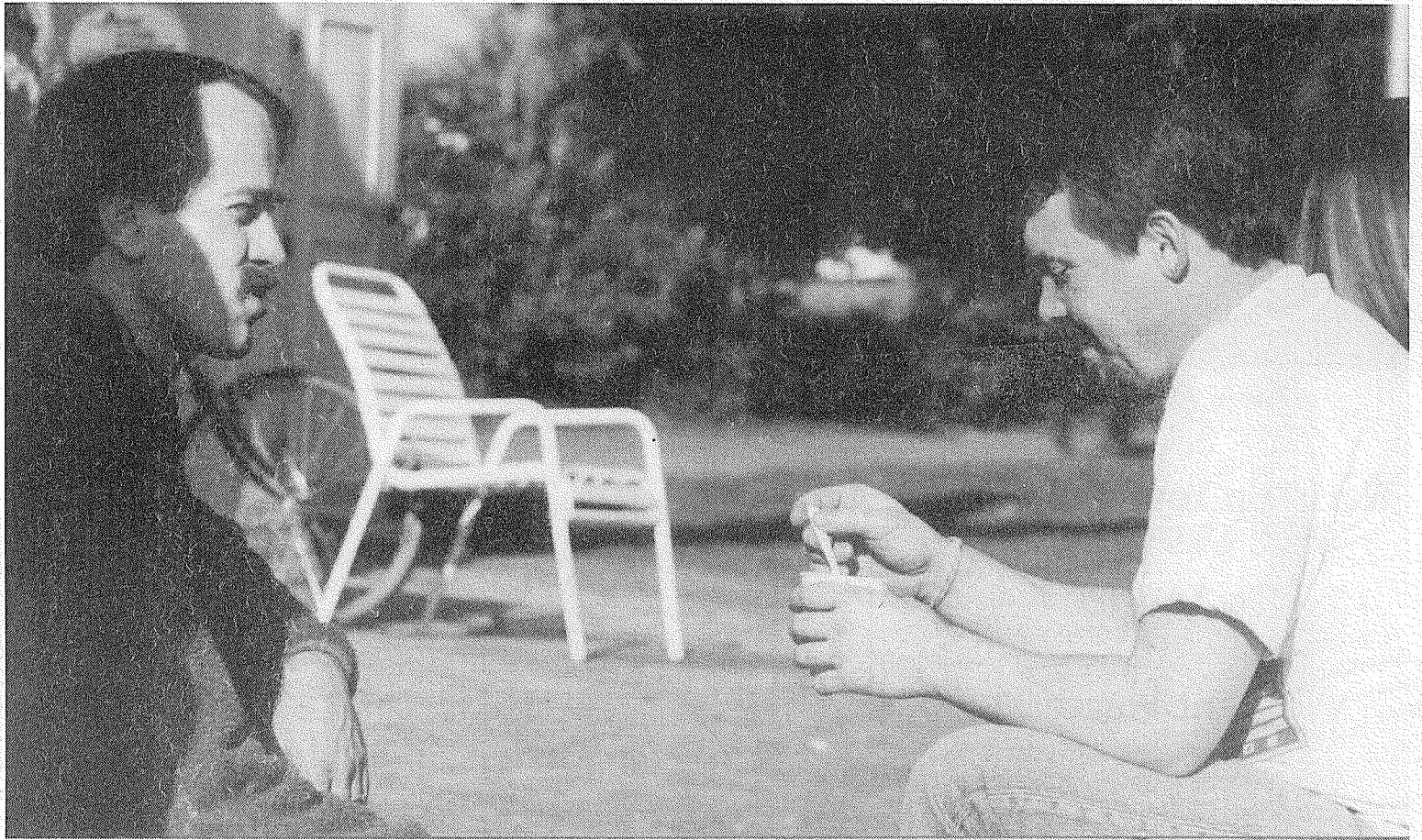
In contrast, he's now working with Stanford students — young, bright, and often fearfully mixed up as they seek a spiritual core.

His challenge has been to bring the Chris-

tian message to those who may be of a different way of life. He has had a special way of reaching people who are often put off by doctrinal ways of the head.

As a result, his book is a way to help people separate the mess from the message. He has lived it from the beginning and has accumulated a lot of experience.

"Open Christianity: Another Road Home" is just one of the local books he has written for local book printers.



Jim Burklo talked with one of the homeless people who find community, love and acceptance at the Urban Ministry's drop-in center. His experiences there led him to write a book bringing the Christian message to those outside of major churches.

"Open Christianity makes room for all sorts of followers of Jesus. It takes the Bible seriously, but it doesn't take it literally," Mr. Burklo says. "To follow Jesus you don't have to give up being a Jew or a Buddhist or a Muslim."

Mr. Burklo presents the Christian message in informal, everyday language, peppered with anecdotes drawn from his own ministries. He relishes the parables and metaphors that connect the Bible with ordinary people. "I really believe that poetry and myth and ritual are much more evocative of truth than cold hard facts," he says.

For example, the second part of the title, "Home by Another Road," refers to the Christmas story of the three wise men who came from the East, through Jerusalem, on their way to worship the baby Jesus in Bethlehem. Warned by an angel, they went home by another road to avoid King Herod's evil plans for the child.

"To find a home, we may need another road," Mr. Burklo says. "This book is a road map for finding another way home to the Christian faith."

Christianity and social justice

Jim Burklo's early years were a journey toward linking his two passions: Christianity and social justice.

Young Jim grew up in Columbiana, Ohio, and moved with his parents to Santa Cruz in the 1960s, at the time of "the summer of love." His father was an engineer; his mother was a journalist and watercolor artist. Her painting adorns the front of Mr. Burklo's new book.

Jim must have driven his Sunday school teachers nuts. He argued and questioned the factual truth of Christian legends, like walking on water, the virgin birth, and the resurrection. The minister once told him, "You're going to argue your way right into seminary," he recalls with a chuckle.

At the same time, he became interested in

the issues of the times — peace, the environment, and social justice. "But I didn't know that social justice was connected to Jesus," he says during an interview on the balcony of his Stanford office near Memorial Church. "The church didn't say much about social justice and spirituality."

His epiphany on Kearsarge Pass came when the war in Vietnam was at its worst. "As a young person facing the draft and wrestling with my conscience about the war, these words of Jesus — and the example of his own effort to love his enemies — had a very profound effect on me. I felt that this was a love worth living and dying for — a love that made sense of Christianity for me."

When he was 18, another mentor introduced him to social action and mysticism. He read Tolstoy, Gandhi and the Quaker writer John Woolman, who gently persuaded the Quakers to give up slavery before the American Revolution.

These readings led him to another revelation. "This is all one thing: Spirituality and making a difference in the world is of one piece," he says, the excitement of discovery still in his voice.

Mr. Burklo graduated from the University of California at Riverside, and went on to San Francisco Theological Seminary in San Anselmo. When he took an internship as a community organizer in Hayward, everything clicked; he realized he could be both in the church and a community organizer.

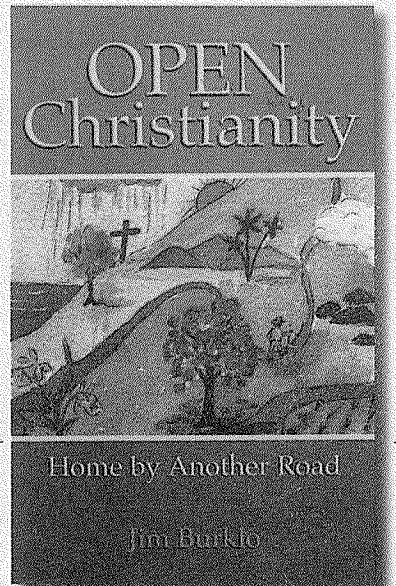
"I thought, this is for me; this is what I want to do," he remembers.

Mr. Burklo has been balancing the two ministries ever since. He came to the First Congregational Church in Palo Alto as an associate minister in 1979 with the assignment that half his time would go toward community organizing. There he became involved in planning to establish the Urban Ministry, which he later headed for eight years.

The Urban Ministry soon took on a life of its own, Mr. Burklo recalls. It started in 1984 as a drop-in center in the choir room of All

Saints Church in Palo Alto, where people could get referrals to other services. "Within two days we had something completely dif-

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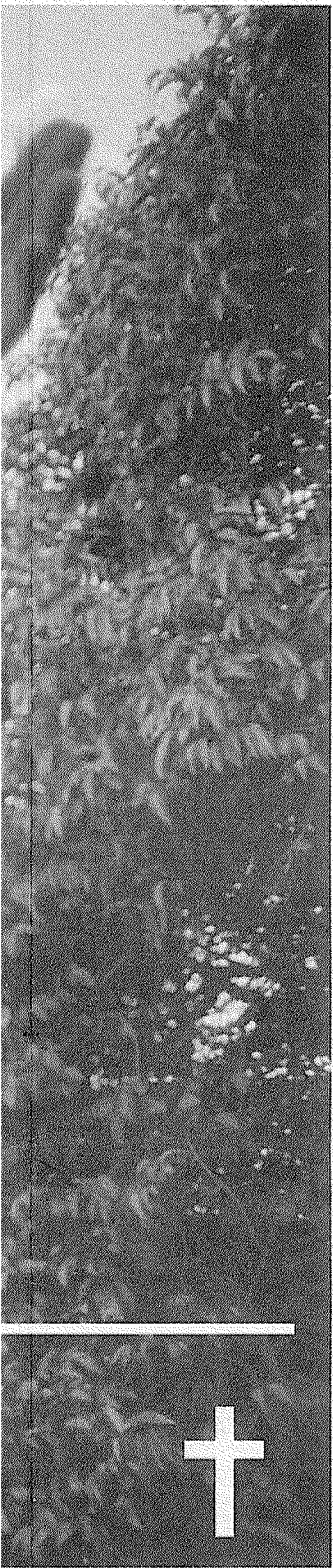
Information

■ Jim Burklo's Web site, www.OpenChristianity.com, gives this definition: "Open Christianity invites you to love God and your neighbor as Jesus did, and to let go of any religious doctrine that gets in love's way. Open Christianity follows Jesus' way of loving even the unlovable without expecting people to believe the unbelievable. It looks at religion as a living, changing language. Open Christianity brings together people of varying backgrounds, beliefs, and ways of life in creating a world of peace, justice and beauty."

■ "Open Christianity: Home by Another Road," by Jim Burklo. Rising Star Press, Los Altos. \$16. The book can be purchased at some local bookstores or through www.RisingStarPress.com.

■ Mr. Burklo can be reached at P.O. Box 20149, Stanford, CA 94309; or 725-0050; e-mail to burklo2@stanford.edu.

Color Photos by **David Neville**



Urban Ministry, ' and bringing d the church

to a wide variety of people who different or no religion. "I've al-
pecial place in my heart for peo-
attracted to Christianity but are
ctrine and dogma that get in the
heart of the faith," he says.
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people of all persuasions to sep-
assage of Christianity as Jesus
n the ideological trappings that
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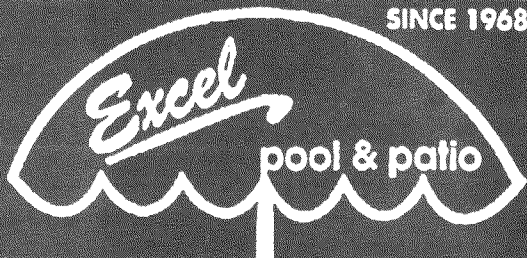
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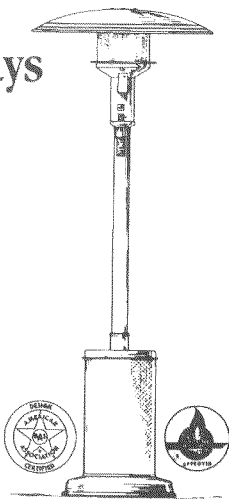
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COVER STORY

► MISSION

continued from page 19

ferent," he says. "We had a community of homeless."

The first director, Lee Cruise, created an atmosphere of love, hospitality, and acceptance.

"People trusted us," Mr. Burklo says. "That acceptance of people as they are made it possible to be useful to people when they were ready for change. If they didn't change and died, we would give them a beautiful memorial service."

During these years, Mr. Burklo left his job at the Congregational Church and worked for a while with the Ecumenical Hunger Program, which started in the church before it moved to East Palo Alto and became the largest food distributor to the poor in the area.

"He is just the greatest," says Nevada Butler, longtime director of the charity. "He can work with people. We just love him here."

For nearly eight years, from 1986 to 1993, Mr. Burklo built the Urban Ministry into a major organization serving the homeless with food, clothes, shelter, and love.

During these years, Mr. Burklo may have learned as much as he gave. "They taught me life is really about love," he says. "I went in as a social engineer — find a problem and fix it. That's important, but what's even more important is to love people and respect them and accept them the way they are. That was a huge lesson."

Loving the unlovable

There's nothing easy about loving some of the folks who come by the Urban Ministry's drop-in center for a cup of coffee, or who bed down in a church basement. Mr. Burklo likes to tell of the wise homeless man on a Palo Alto street who summed up his situation, "I'm ugly in a no-ugly zone."

In talks, Mr. Burklo often refers to how easy it is for people to believe in miracles, or what politicians promise, or everything the Bible tells us. "It's easier to believe the unbelievable than to love the unlovable," he says.

But even Mr. Burklo has had his problems with love. "Love is very challenging," he admits. "The biggest challenge may be loving your family."

He was divorced before marrying Roberta Maran. They live in Menlo Park with their daughter Liz, a freshman at Menlo-Atherton High School. Ms. Maran also has two grown children.

As the Urban Ministry grew, Mr. Burklo found himself becoming more of an executive and less of a minister. "I always dreamed of a parish," he says.

So when the College Heights United Church of Christ in San Mateo needed a new minister, Mr. Burklo accepted that post. He also took on the position of campus minister at Stanford, where he counsels students who come from many backgrounds with many needs.

"I am one of the blessed people whose vocation and career are one and the same," he says. "I'm lucky."

Mr. Burklo is not your ordinary minister. He's not into vestments. In his church, he mixes traditional liturgy with chants. At Stanford, he counsels, leads meditation groups, and leads students on popular "Reality Check" tours of Palo Alto and East Palo Alto.

"We show them wealth and poverty on both sides of the freeway — homeless encampments in Palo Alto, and big fancy houses in East Palo Alto," he says. "We stop at the drop-in center and Ecumenical Hunger Program. I describe the social and economic history of the area."

Mr. Burklo's experience talking with Stanford students helped propel him into writing the book. The students expect him to be more overtly Christian, or to try to recruit them into one of the campus organizations. They are surprised that he can discuss religion in ordinary conversation with no ulterior motive.

"I also encounter a steady stream of students who are in recovery from evangelical or fundamentalist Christianity," he notes. Mr. Burklo has learned never to argue about matters of belief.

"My job is to listen," he says. "You don't argue with people's experience, no matter how bizarre. I ask people what their experience of God is — you can't argue about that."

Christianity as language

"I think of Christianity as a language," says Mr. Burklo. "We need a language to express our deepest experiences."

He compares Christianity with English: It's free; no one is in charge, even though some claim to be. And both English and Christianity evolve with time.

Mr. Burklo has found that the language of Christianity helped him in working with the homeless and people in crisis, where you confront the classic theological problem of suffering: Why must we suffer? What is the meaning of suffering?

He responds: "The great metaphors of Christianity have a great deal to tell us about the meaning of suffering, and its rituals are powerful agents for healing of suffering."

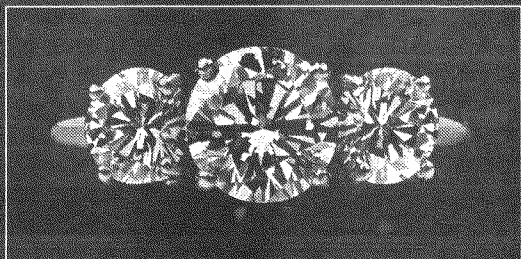
Mr. Burklo revels in the richness of the Christian language, and the power of its myths. Like the Christmas story, which resonates far beyond the community of practicing Christians.

"The Christmas story is a profound, many-layered myth," Mr. Burklo says. "It's an interpretation of the meaning of the history of Israel. And the history of Israel is a metaphor for the history of humankind."

The Christmas story gives us universal themes of promise and hope, the Prince of Peace, and the Kingdom of God coming to earth. "Heaven on earth will be when we have justice and peace in the real world," Mr. Burklo says. "It is time to restore hope that we really can bring the Kingdom of Heaven to earth. I have hope." ■

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Jim Burklo reached out to the homeless and desperate — and often the unlovable — at the Urban Ministry drop-in center.

