

# WALKING THE WALK

Missionaries help poor areas by settling there, one says.

By GWENDOLYN DRISCOLL  
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**SANTA ANA** • The tree above John Hayes' head is white with spring blossoms, a symbol of transformation as potent as the neatly landscaped apartments behind him.

When Hayes lived here, on Santa Ana's Minnie Street, it was one of Orange County's most dangerous neighborhoods.

"Every six weeks somebody was ending up dead in a Dumpster," Hayes says.

It was 1984, and Hayes was a Christian missionary living in a neighborhood known for gang violence, drugs and prostitution.

It was also home to poor Hispanics and struggling new immigrants from Cambodia. After a period of what Hayes calls "community courtship," the street's residents opened up to the young white man who seemed strangely content to live in a neighborhood most wished to flee.

Minnie Street became Hayes' "spiritual womb" - a place where he refined his poverty-fighting philosophy of "submerging" himself in the lives of the poor.

That philosophy is the subject of a new book, "Submerge: Living Deep in a Shallow World," and a new quest: to recruit Christians willing to live among the poor.

"The poor are tired of professionals coming in with clipboards," Hayes told a gathering of 15 church leaders in Anaheim recently. "Poverty is something we know about. It's poor people we don't know."

Hayes' outreach comes at a time when short-term missionary work is soaring in popularity. Up to 1.5 million Christians from the United States travel abroad each year on short trips, according to an article by Robert J. Priest of Trinity International University in Deerfield, Ill., and others in the journal *Missiology*.

Hayes advocates the opposite approach: a long-term presence by missionaries willing to live in the same conditions as those they come to help.

For Hayes this meant moving into a run-down apartment complex on Minnie Street in 1984. Conditions were so crowded - dozens of residents often slept in one apartment - Hayes had to wait five months to find a room.

He stayed seven years, attempting to evangelize his Buddhist and Catholic neigh-



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**LANDS TO CONQUER:** John Hayes is working on sending Innerchange teams to Central America and Africa.

bors but also encouraging them to improve their communities.

In the process, he says, he saw gang fights, drug deals and a nervous police officer who pulled a gun on him.

He was also witness to what he calls the "amazing ... network of relationships" that help sustain low-income families in times of trouble.

"The poor have already built these elaborate family relationships - they may be dysfunctional - but they help each other," Hayes says.

The experience helped solidify his conviction that outsiders cannot understand the problems of poverty.

"We're wired relationally," Hayes says on a recent tour of his old Santa Ana neighborhood. Outside assistance by visiting church groups or charitable agencies are "like flight deck stuff, when the [poor are] down at this level" - Hayes lowers his hand to his side.

Minnie Street's families helped Hayes in turn, decorating his apartment, feeding him up to "six or seven meals" a day and teaching him a lesson about generosity that inspired the formation of Innerchange, an organization that places long-term missionaries in poor communities.

Innerchange has 60 staff members in eight cities in the United States and abroad, and Hayes says he is looking for more.

"I have grown weary of not having people to deliver to a township in South Africa," he says. "We will never mass-produce our staff, [but] we could grow faster than we are."

Innerchange no longer works on Minnie Street. Hayes, who left to start other chapters, turned over missionary activities to Irvine-based Mariner's Church.

Hayes and his wife, Deanna, and two daughters now live in a low-income housing project in London, where they are try-



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**REGIONAL PRESENCE:** Though John Hayes has left Santa Ana, there is an Innerchange project in a Los Angeles neighborhood of mostly Mexican and Central-American immigrants.

## HAYES

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ing to launch an Innerchange effort.

It is an unexpected choice of careers for the tall, extroverted Princeton University graduate who "used to break into a rash just going into a church" and who spent his first years out of college as a hard-drinking businessman in Japan.

At the age of 25, he says, he found himself dead drunk in a washroom.

"I caught a glimpse of myself in the window and thought: Is this where I want to be?" he recalls.

A search for alternatives led him to Yale University, where he studied international relations with vague thoughts of becoming a diplomat.

"But I started to glimpse how little direct change I would accomplish in the political world," Hayes says. "That's when I started thinking about mission."

That instinct led him to India - "I wanted to experience

God in the poorest place in the world" - and to a horrific encounter.

In 1980, he witnessed the brutal beating of a destitute man by a policeman.

"That's when I realized I wanted to help people directly."

Hayes' epiphany brought him to Los Angeles, where he worked briefly for an inner city organization and rubbed shoulders with donors such as Howard Ahmanson.

Ahmanson counseled Hayes to visit Orange County. When he did, he was shocked.

"What fascinated me about Orange County was that there was a very high level of poverty that was almost invisible," Hayes recalls. "And no one was doing anything about it."

Not that Hayes can quantify his own organization's success in tackling poverty or advancing his stated goal of neighborhood transformation.

"We stopped counting a long time ago," Hayes says. "When people start to count, they start to focus more on performance than on ... obedience to God."

Instead, he supplies anecdotes: the Cambodian parents

who began volunteering in a local public school; the San Francisco gang members who built a park to give their younger brothers and sisters something to do besides join a gang.

To Hayes, success means "poor people begin to dream dreams of renewal about their place without dreaming of getting out."

In Santa Ana, a revived Minnie Street may owe its transformation less to Hayes' efforts than to the city's decision to plant a police station on the block, paint buildings and repave roads and sidewalks.

Even so, "I still think that if we didn't come to that street, it would not look like that," Hayes says.

And although he appreciates the efforts of short-term missionary groups, Hayes says he still believes a deeper commitment is needed.

"It's very good to have visitors come to the field. ... But it's usually more about the visitor than the people," Hayes says. "Long-term is always better."

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