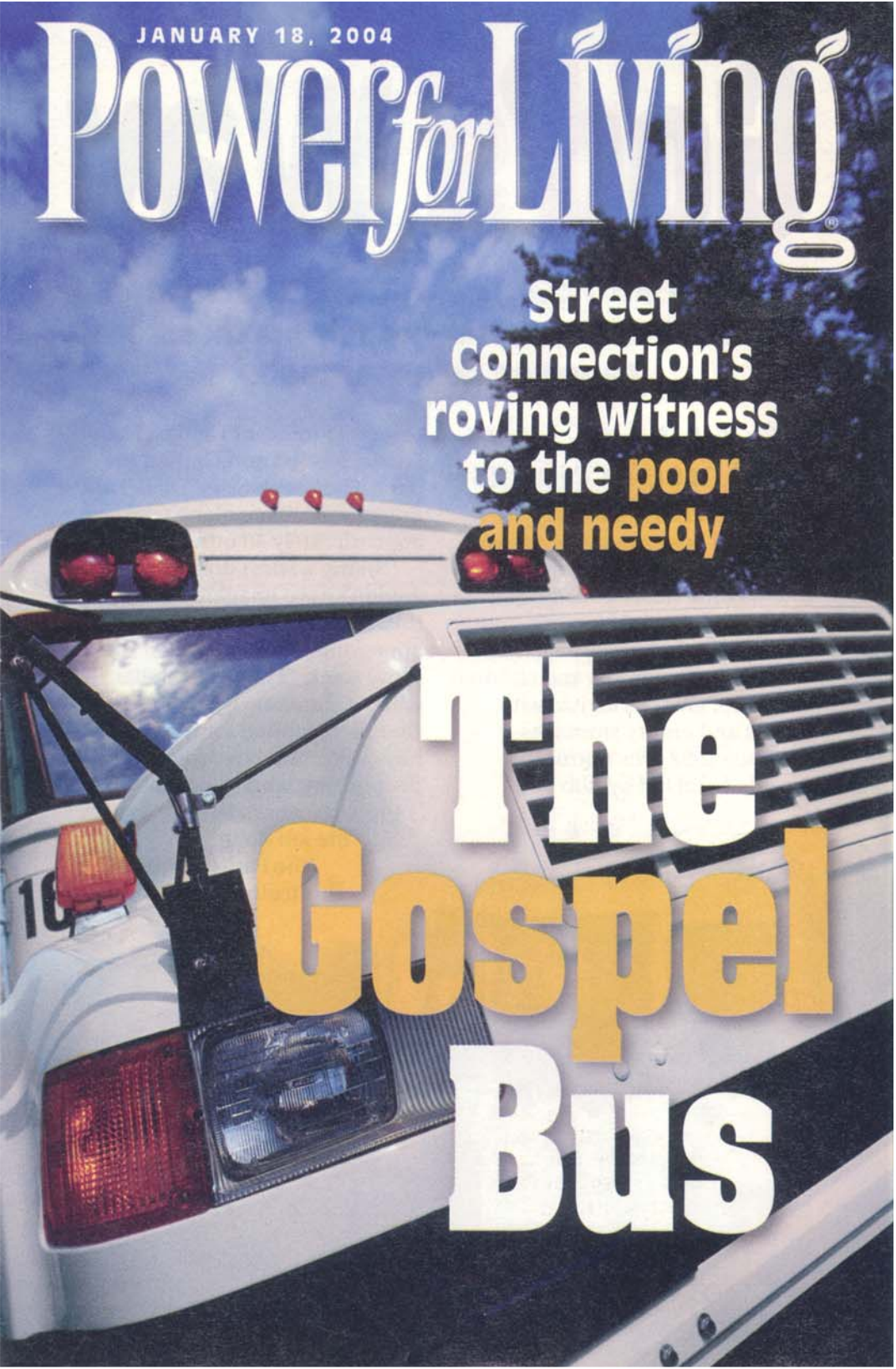
JANUARY 18, 2004

Power for Living®

Street Connection's roving witness to the poor and needy

The Gospel Bus



God's Way

Rob and Sandra Pattison attend to the "least of these" in their northeastern Canadian neighborhood.

BY GRACE FOX

Three evenings each week, a bus christened *Street Connection* rumbles into low-income residential developments sprinkled with crack houses. Up to 300 inhabitants each week, mostly single parents and children under 13, greet its arrival with smiles and empty stomachs.

Since 1992, this outreach, founded and led by Rob and Sandra Pattison of Halifax, Nova Scotia, has fed and clothed the poor. Their teenagers, Daniel and Emily, participate along with approximately 40 other volunteers.

"In my wildest dreams I couldn't have imagined doing this," says Sandra, who cooks approximately 50 quarts of soup every week. "I'm not a kitchen whiz. If someone had told me what God had planned for us, I would have said, 'You have the wrong people.' But when God calls, He provides what's needed to get the job done."

The Pattisons testify to this truth. Rob, a former

Royal Canadian Mounted Police officer, was born into a conservative Christian family and participated in church activities throughout his growing up years. At age 31, however, he realized his need for a personal Saviour and prayed to receive Jesus Christ into his life. Shortly after his conversion, he read Matthew 25:35-36: "For I was [hungry], and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me." Taking the verse literally, he visited prison inmates and volunteered at a local soup kitchen.

PHOTO COURTESY OF GRACE FOX

The Pattison family (left to right): Rob and Sandra Pattison with children Emily and Daniel.

One afternoon nearly a year later, Rob and Sandra were driving in downtown Halifax. "That's when it hit me!" says Rob. "I thought, *What this city really needs is a portable soup kitchen to help people in different areas.*"

The Pattisons' church encouraged them by giving money to buy a school bus. Rob began remodeling the vehicle, copying plans used by a similar ministry in New York and Toronto. But it wasn't long before he faced a conflict: the money ran out before he completed the task, and he couldn't satisfactorily juggle both his paying job and the renovations. Pattison followed his strong conviction, quit his job, and launched into vocational ministry.

"We had no financial support or savings account," says Pattison. "We had two children, a mortgage, a car payment, and miscellaneous bills, but we also had a confidence that God had called us into this outreach."

The day after Pattison quit his job, God confirmed that call by providing the family's first month's salary. They'd tried unsuccessfully for several months to sell their piano, but that evening a woman phoned about it. "The Lord impressed upon me to buy your piano," she said, then paid their asking price.

After a newspaper article featured the Pattisons' venture, a volunteer encouraged farmers to donate vegetables. People gave supplies to complete the bus. When $5,000 was required to buy a furnace and hot water heater, a man said, "I don't have much

time, but I have a lot of money and would like to help you. What do you need?" Later that day he delivered a check for the full amount.

On another occasion a stranger phoned when both the ministry and the Pattison family were financially broke. "I'd like to make a donation," the woman said. She suggested a meeting place about 30 minutes away.

"I didn't think I had enough gas to drive there," says Rob. "Thinking she might donate $25, I wondered if the trip would be worth my time." His doubts disappeared when the woman wrote a check for $5,000.

"Humanly speaking, this project wasn't a rational thing to do," says Pattison, "but Sandra and I both had a definite peace—that was God's gift to us. He gave us the faith to trust Him. Without it, we would have been scared to death. We recall sometimes how family and friends thought we were crazy—I can't blame them! I would have thought the same thing.

"We're human, though," he continues. "There have been times when we've been down to our last penny and we've battled doubt. We get a little concerned, but God has never failed us."

"I've learned lessons of faith I wouldn't have learned otherwise," adds Sandra. "We've witnessed amazing answers to prayer. When we remember them, we say, 'Wow!' We're reminded how awesome and faithful God is. He's worked in so many practical ways bringing necessary details together. I stand in awe."

Pattison quotes Philippians 4:19: "But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus."

"We have the incredible privilege of seeing God do this on a daily basis," he says. "He's paid every bill and met every need. The past 10 years have been incredible."

The original plan of serving soup quickly evolved into far more than the Pattisons had imagined. During the first five years, Street Connection provided hot meals for prostitutes and the homeless in downtown Halifax. Volunteer Joyce Hunt developed ongoing friendships with many of the women. "Inviting them onto the bus for food and warmth was a practical way to share about Christ's love without pressuring them," she says. "Eventually they asked who we were and why we were doing this. We met their practical needs, then helped each one understand her value to God."

When volunteer safety in the community became an issue and it became apparent that other agencies were adequately meeting its needs, Street Connection moved from the inner city to low-income housing developments. Its five-year presence in the city, however, left an eternal impact and opened additional opportunities for service. Hunt now lives in the same neighborhood where many of the women and their families reside. She visits them in their homes, in the hospital or prison, attends court with them, and takes several of their children to Sunday School.

"Sometimes we have to earn the privilege of stepping into people's lives and telling them about Christ,

their hope for today," says Hunt. "Street Connection makes that possible."

Hunt also coordinates and distributes clothing donations, a facet of Street Connection that began on their first night downtown, after someone donated a pair of boots to give away. Sure enough, a man came to the bus asking for boots. They fit him perfectly.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF GRACE FOX

Pattison quotes the late great missionary pioneer Hudson Taylor: "God's work done in God's way will never lack God's supply."

Every week several dozen people line up at the bus to fill out forms stating their clothing needs. Volunteers fill the orders and bring the items the following week. Some of the clothing is new, contributed by the community. It's stored in an apartment for which the ministry pays a dollar per month rent—another God-given provision. The endless need for clothing is also met through behind-the-scenes volunteers who knit warm winter hats, mitts, and socks year-round. The items are added to Christmas gift bags already stuffed with toothbrush and toothpaste, candy bars, a pencil, and a Christian book.

In addition to serving soup, hot dogs, baked goods, and about 700 loaves of donated bread each week, the ministry's workers also serve 1,500 complete Christmas dinners annually from the back of a 24-foot rental truck. Along with the kitchen staff of the World Trade and Convention Center in Halifax, volunteers spend two days cooking 1,000 pounds of turkey and several hundred pounds of potatoes and other vegetables. Meals are packaged in aluminum pans, frozen, and distributed on Christmas Eve.

How do people respond? "They're usually grateful and say 'thank you,'" says Pattison.

"Occasionally people come to the bus holding a cigarette in one hand and a cell phone in the other, and I wonder how much help they really need. Perhaps my greatest challenge comes when I see people abuse what we offer. At those times, I ask myself why we're doing this. But over the years I've drawn one conclusion—God is the One who has raised this ministry and He gives to people whether they deserve it or not. It reminds me of God's grace. He gives us the breath we need to live and the gift of salvation even though we don't deserve it."

On the days when Pattison feels like quitting, he only has to look into the eyes of the dirty faced, hungry, sometimes abused children who usually come to the bus without their parents. "These kids are innocent and often victims of situations into which they're born," he says. "They're my main motivation, comprising more than half the number of people we serve."

After years of outreach, volunteers have developed a strong rapport with the people.

"They trust us now," says Pattison. "They know what we stand for. We begin each meal with prayer and pass out tracts and Bibles, but we don't come on heavy to anyone, trying to convert them on the spot. We just want to live God's grace before them, to show them Christianity in action."

It's obvious that God has called Street Connection to be His arms and voice to the men, women, and children living in the needy neighborhoods of Halifax. He has provided the Pattisons and others with everything necessary to fulfill the task.

Pattison quotes the late great missionary pioneer Hudson Taylor: "God's work done in God's way will never lack God's supply." "I testify to this statement's truth," he says. "God is faithful. Absolutely faithful."

For more information:

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Daily Bible Readings

- ☐ **Sunday, January 18** *Read: Matthew 13:33-58*
- ☐ **Monday, January 19** *Read: Matthew 14:1-21*
- ☐ **Tuesday, January 20** *Read: Matthew 14:22-36*
- ☐ **Wednesday, January 21** *Read: Matthew 15:1-20*
- ☐ **Thursday, January 22** *Read: Matthew 15:21-39*
- ☐ **Friday, January 23** *Read: Matthew 16*
- ☐ **Saturday, January 24** *Read: Matthew 17*

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"Bread of Life Ministries" would like to thank those mentioned above for their kind cooperation in permitting us to reprint this article.

Please Note:

Our E-mail address has been changed to robp@street.ns.ca

My Work

Lord, let me not die
until I've done for Thee
My earthly work,
whatever it might be.
Call me not hence with
mission unfulfilled;
Let me not leave my
space of ground untilled;
Impress this truth upon
me that not one
Can do my portion that
I leave undone.

- Author Unknown