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The Overnighters

Abstract
This is a film review of *The Overnighters* (2013), directed by Jesse Moss.

Author Notes
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The Overnighters
(2013)
U.S. Documentary
U. S. Documentary Special Jury award
for Intuitive Filmmaking
Directed by Jesse Moss

As a documentary film, this is the story of one pastor's efforts to live out the Christian virtues of loving your neighbor as yourself and showing compassion to those in need. Pastor Jay Reinke is the pastor of the Concordia Lutheran Church in Williston, North Dakota. Williston, N.D., is the home of a huge boom in oil and natural gas production. Starting pay in the oil fields can easily exceed $100,000 per year and the unemployment rate is almost zero. But the boom has brought thousands of people to the city, some of whom are desperate for work. Many of these are not qualified for work in the oil fields and they cannot find housing. Housing has become scarce and very expensive. The result is that Pastor Reinke finds himself inundated by a homeless population of mostly men who cannot find work, even in the boom circumstances of Williston. Many of these men have criminal records and use drugs. Two of them are registered sex offenders.

As the pastor of a Christian church, how should Jay Reinke respond to the overwhelming needs of the new population of Williston, N.D.? Pastor Jay responds by opening up his heart and his church to the homeless. He allows some of the men to actually live in the church, but only overnight. He also allows others to sleep in their cars in the parking lot of the church. But these efforts are a drop in the bucket and they bring a serious backlash from the community which finds itself housing a group of men who do not behave in the way that the neighbors expect. Pastor Jay also finds a backlash from his own congregation.

The question of the film, then, is how do you respond to a need that is overwhelming when you face the resistance of your community—both church community and neighborhood? Pastor Jay responds by continuing to let men live in the church and sleep in the parking lot. He even takes one of the sex offenders into his own home, convincing his family that this is the Christian way to behave. Finally the city closes down the "Overnighter" program at the Concordia Lutheran Church. At the end of the movie there is a twist. Pastor Jay has reached a point in his own life where he is willing to admit that he is gay and that he has committed adultery. The result is that Pastor Jay loses his church and family and now

finds himself in the same position as the men he has tried so hard to help through the Overnighter program.

At the beginning of the movie, Pastor Jay talks about the public persona of the minister and the private person that exists behind that persona. His statement is a foreshadowing of what is to come. We find that behind the do-gooder persona is the secretly gay man. But, I think there is much more to the story than these obvious elements. I was struck by, not Pastor Jay's secret, but by his arrogance. The image of the person doing what Jesus would do is so important to Pastor Jay that he behaves in ways that show no respect for others, including his family. Only Pastor Jay's goals and concerns are important. What Pastor Jay wants is what is of value. What this raises is the question of whether someone can use Christian values inappropriately. Can you be a performing Christian but not a Christian at heart? What does it mean to be a "real" Christian? Can being a good person be the image we want to project, maybe even to ourselves, but not the real us? Pastor Jay's arrogance and his insistence that others see things his way and adopt his view—the Christian view—turn out to be the more interesting issue. The persona is that of a compassionate, caring individual who loves his neighbor. But the real Pastor Jay is

arrogant, inconsiderate of others, and willing to harm others to maintain the facade. This is a story that is important to all men of the cloth and not just to those few who find themselves facing more need than they can meet.

There is one other element of the film that I found interesting. Throughout the film Pastor Jay and others live their lives according to Bible verses. If they ask themselves, "What should I do?" they answer by reference to a verse from the Bible. This means, of course, that they believe they are always doing God's will. They always act with the authority of the Almighty on their side. But, they might simply use whatever verse suits their purposes at the moment to justify what they already want to do. They do what they want to do and then claim that this is what God wants us to do by referring to the Bible. This looks more like sacrilege to me than it does doing the Lord's work. *The Overnighters* is a movie that most importantly asks us to distinguish between wearing a Christian persona and being a Christian. Maybe this is the difference between the righteous and the self-righteous.

— William L. Blizek