Man on Fire

FOR HIS ENTIRE LIFE, CHARLES MOORE SOUGHT TO HEED GOD'S CALL TO CHANGE A BROKEN WORLD—FIGHTING PASSIONATELY FOR CIVIL RIGHTS, HELPING THE POOR, AND FEEDING THE HUNGRY. UNTIL ONE DAY, IN A DESOLATE PARKING LOT IN GRAND SALINE, HE DECIDED HE HADN'T DONE ENOUGH.

by MICHAEL HALL
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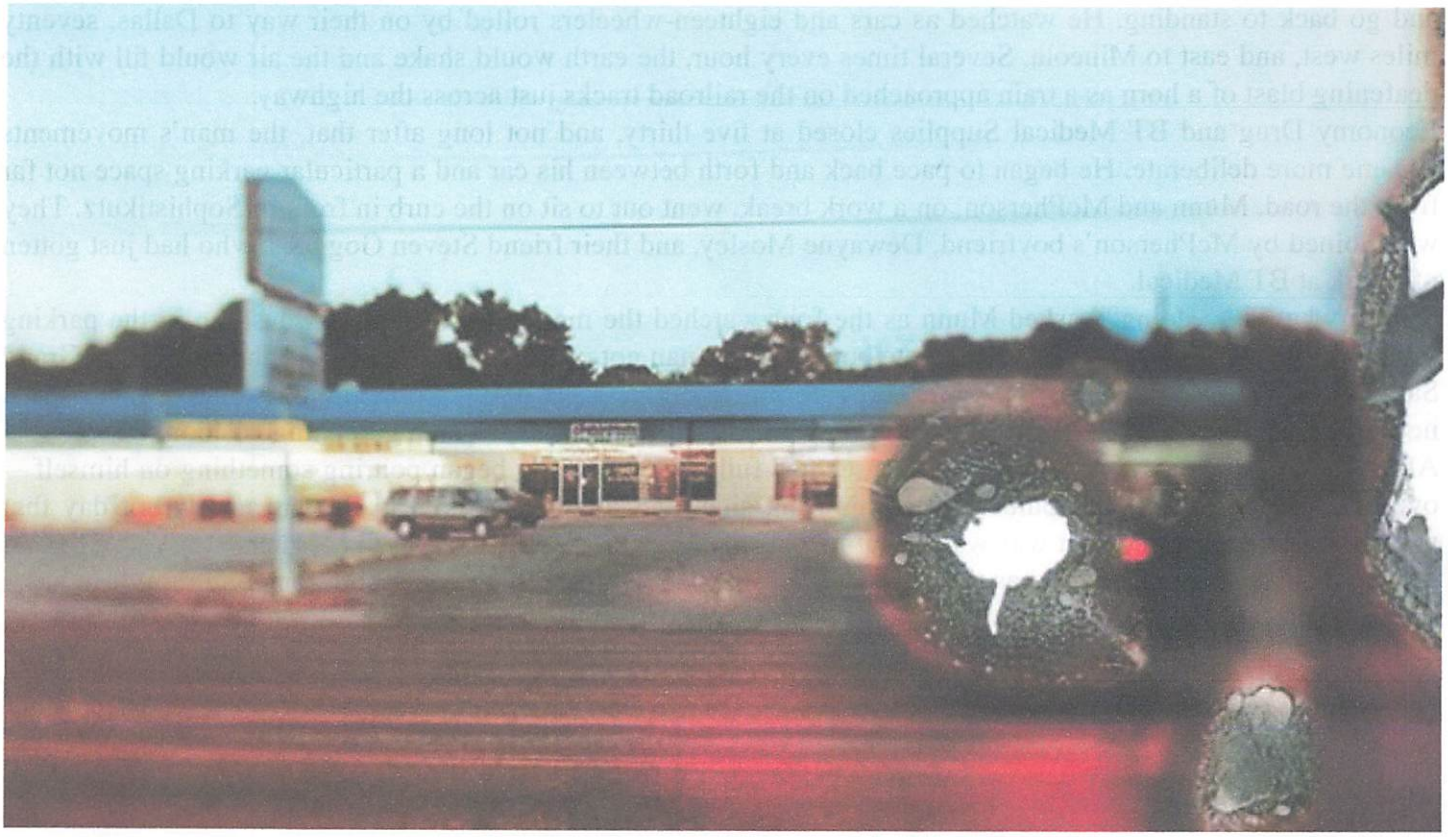

The strip center on the edge of Grand Saline where Charles Moore spent his last day.
PHOTOGRAPH BY LEANN MUELLER

The strip-center parking lot where the Reverend Charles Moore chose to end his life is as large as a football field and as lonely as prairie, the cracked gray asphalt dotted with weeds, shards of glass, and crushed Copenhagen cans. The faded yellow paint on the pavement recalls other days, when the Dollar General here was a Piggly Wiggly and members of the Night Prowlers, a teenage car club, would come park their hot rods and open the hoods. Residents of Grand Saline (population 3,136) know the lot as the Bear Grounds, and on Friday and Saturday nights, high school kids still gather to hang out and play music on their truck radios. ("Bear," as any of them can tell you, was the nickname of Wayne Clark, a car buff who used to park his '55 Chevy here and watch the world go by on U.S. 80.) When the kids get bored, they pile into their trucks and "take the loop"—pull out onto the highway, drive to the west end of town, cruise through the Sonic, then drive back, past the Salt

Palace and the Salt City Inn. It doesn't take long to complete this ritual circle of small-town life. On any given Friday night, as many as two dozen kids may meet at the Bear Grounds.

But on the morning of Monday, June 23, the parking lot was almost empty. Angi McPherson, a receptionist at Sophistikutz, a hair and tanning salon next to the Dollar General, got to work at eleven and noticed an elderly man standing some 150 feet away from the storefront. Dressed in khakis and a pale-blue shirt, with thinning white hair and tortoise-shell glasses, he didn't exactly look out of place. He could have been one of the many locals going to pick up a prescription at Economy Drug or a cane at BT Medical Supplies, a few doors down.

Except that he wasn't going anywhere. Monday is a slow day at Sophistikutz, and as morning turned to afternoon, McPherson found herself watching the man. Other shoppers came and went, but he stood by his car, a Volkswagen hatchback, leaning against it with his ankles crossed, looking toward the road. Occasionally he would walk over to a storage crate that the Dollar General was using as it remodeled its store, and he'd lean against that for a while. It was a hot, windless afternoon that only got hotter; still, the man stayed out there.

Mallie Munn, one of the Sophistikutz stylists, noticed him too. She saw him move the car a few times to other parking spaces, but never too far away. He had stuck a few pieces of paper on the hatchback window; maybe, she thought, he was selling it. He'd open the trunk and root around, as if looking for something, then close it and go back to standing. He watched as cars and eighteen-wheelers rolled by on their way to Dallas, seventy miles west, and east to Mineola. Several times every hour, the earth would shake and the air would fill with the deafening blast of a horn as a train approached on the railroad tracks just across the highway.

Economy Drug and BT Medical Supplies closed at five-thirty, and not long after that, the man's movements became more deliberate. He began to pace back and forth between his car and a particular parking space not far from the road. Munn and McPherson, on a work break, went out to sit on the curb in front of Sophistikutz. They were joined by McPherson's boyfriend, Dewayne Mosley, and their friend Steven Goggans, who had just gotten off work at BT Medical.

"Guys, what is he doing?" asked Munn as the four watched the man lay a white foam cushion in the parking space, on the pavement next to the concrete bumper. The man got on his knees. Munn, who had moved to Grand Saline from Seattle, had seen Muslim cabbies stop their cars and get out, lay down a mat, and pray, but she'd never seen anyone do that in Texas. "Is he pulling weeds?" she asked. Was that a gardening cushion?

After standing around all day, the man now seemed full of purpose. He began pouring something on himself—over his left leg, over his shoulder, down his right side, and finally on his head. It was such a hot day that maybe, the friends thought, it was water. But he was using a red can. "Is that gas?" McPherson asked. She and Munn stood up. The four stared as the man set the can aside and picked up something long and thin. "He has a lighter," gasped Munn.

The man was still kneeling, his back straight. He raised the lighter to his head.

Charles in the early nineties. (Photograph courtesy of Guy Moore)

For almost 75 years, Charles Robert Moore sought to hear, understand, and heed the call of God, wrestling every day with the words and deeds of Jesus Christ, trying to figure out how best to live. As a preacher—whether his work took him to Austin, Chicago, or Maliwada, India—he often ministered to those on the margins. As an activist, he sought to feed the hungry and give a voice to those who didn't have one. He could be

bold and fearless, confronting authorities and upending social expectations. Mankind, Charles thought, had made a terrible mess of this world, and he felt an obligation to help set things right.

A child of the Depression, he was born on July 18, 1934, in the tiny community of Union Springs, also known as Bugtussle, just down the road from Grand Saline. His father, John, worked at the local salt mine, loading sacks of rock salt onto the railroad cars that stopped next to U.S. 80; his mother, Hertilene, managed various clothing stores. A smart, strong-willed, and devout woman, Hertilene shaped her family's spiritual life early; when Charles was only four, his older sister, Lona, would sit him on a tree stump in the front yard and read him Bible verses, making him recite the words of Jesus. "And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them," the two would repeat, and "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Eventually the family moved to Grand Saline, where they attended First Methodist Church, and Charles distinguished himself in Sunday school with his knowledge of Scripture. The shy, melancholy boy was inspired by Jesus, whom he saw as lonely and heroic. He wanted to be a leader like his pastor, Brother Harold Fagan, and soon became president of the youth fellowship.

Charles was bright, liked to read, and dreamed of being a writer; his mother encouraged his studies so he could be the first in the family to go to college. Though her son enjoyed the outdoors and working with his hands—he and his friend Don Vickery would disappear for hours to swim in local creeks and build go-karts and boats—he was also reflective. When he was fifteen, he was sent as his Boy Scout troop's representative to the International Jamboree in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. During one of the ceremonies, as he watched a spotlight shine on the American flag, he had an epiphany: the image, he felt, was a sign that he should return home and preach a sermon about the light of God. First Methodist gave him the pulpit one Sunday, and the boy's words were so compelling that the pastor encouraged him to go into the ministry.

Charles loved Methodism, whose founder, John Wesley, had also experienced an epiphany one day, when his heart was "strangely warmed" by the simple understanding that all he needed for salvation was sincere faith in Jesus. Wesley had gone on to articulate a stirring theology based on the concept of divine grace, a gift from God that inspired a deep and actively lived faith. Charles felt passionate about inviting others to experience this grace, and by seventeen, he was preaching once a month at a nearby rural church; two years later, after enrolling at Tyler Junior College, he was preaching weekly at a small church in Starr-ville, just down the road. A strapping, good-looking young man with a wide, innocent face, Charles had a knowing smile that hid his intense determination to help his listeners be, as Wesley once wrote, "habitually filled with the love of God and neighbor."

It was the fifties, however—a time when African Americans received very little love from small East Texas congregations, let alone status as neighbors. Growing up, Charles had seen the sign out on U.S. 80 that read, "N—er, don't let the sun go down on you in Grand Saline," and he had heard stories of blacks who were assaulted and terrorized; an old white man in town known as Uncle Billy had once buttonholed him and some friends and told them how Grand Saline's Pole-town neighborhood got its name: black men and women had been hanged from a lynching pole there. Nevertheless, the civil rights era was dawning, and protests and boycotts of segregated classrooms, buses, and restaurants had begun around the country. In May 1954 the Supreme Court ordered the integration of schools with its decision in *Brown* v. *Board of Education*. Appalled by the prejudice he saw around him, that summer Charles stated from the pulpit in Starrville that he agreed with the Supreme Court.

His words did not go unnoticed. One of the church's trustees invited Charles to his house. "Would you ever have a n—er in your home to eat with you?" he asked Charles. When Charles said yes, the trustee angrily ordered him off his property. Around that same time, preaching at First Methodist in Grand Saline, Charles also managed to infuriate his home church. "In a sermon, he attacked the prejudice in the community," recalled his childhood friend Vickery. "He encouraged the congregation to accept everyone as God's children. He hurt some feelings with that message, stunned a lot of people. He was told not to come back."

But Charles was already moving on. He had met a striking woman from the neighboring town of Van named Patricia Tunnell; he and Pat, as she was known, soon married, and in 1955 Charles transferred to Southern

Methodist University, in Dallas. The small-town boy was immediately impressed with the massive oaks and perfect lawns of the campus; he later wrote that Dallas Hall, with its columns and elegant rotunda, was "the most beautiful sight I had ever seen." He found the place to be a spiritual oasis too: the following year, after graduating with a B.A. in English, he enrolled at SMU's Perkins School of Theology, where he was exposed to the writings of contemporary theologians—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr—who, like him, had wrestled with questions about God's role in the modern world and Christian responsibility. He also studied the early-twentieth-century Social Gospel movement, which argued that genuine spirituality should bring about the end of problems such as poverty and prejudice. And because Perkins was one of the first graduate schools to integrate—it did so in 1952, though the university as a whole wouldn't follow until 1962—Charles could discuss civil rights with students who were black. "Perkins gave him a whole new vision of what he could do in the world," said Pat, who lived with Charles and their son Steve, born in 1956, in a family dormitory. Charles graduated second in his class; he would later call SMU "my soul's home."

Yet he was quickly faced with the realities of the world when he became an associate pastor at First Methodist Church in Carthage, back in East Texas. "Racial tensions were high," remembered Jack Albright, a friend and fellow local pastor, "and in East Texas, they were *very* high." It was 1959, and sit-ins at lunch counters and libraries were now taking place throughout the South; in 1961 the Freedom Riders took their first bus and were assaulted by churchgoing members of the Ku Klux Klan in Birmingham, Alabama. Albright and Charles would meet for coffee and discuss what to say to their congregations about these events, knowing they couldn't directly address integration. "You had to be subtle," recalled Albright. "It was a very emotional issue." When the men spoke about dignity and equality, they were labeled communists; when Charles refused to participate in the community's annual blackface minstrel show, he and Pat received threatening phone calls.

Charles preaching from the pulpit in the mid-sixties. (Photograph courtesy of Guy Moore)

Before long Charles decided to leave East Texas and moved his family to San Antonio, where he served at Jefferson Methodist Church and then at St. Matthew's Methodist Church. The budding integrationist yearned to join the front lines of the civil rights movement in Mississippi and Alabama, but he settled for making a smaller statement closer to home, reaching out to the pastor of a local black church and arranging for a choir and

preacher swap. He soon faced his first genuine crisis: in 1964 a young man in his congregation, a father of three whom Charles had counseled and gotten to know well, killed himself. Charles was devastated. "He felt that if he had done his job right, the man wouldn't have committed suicide," recalled Pat.

Charles was so affected that he began to question his calling. Around this time, he received a visit from an old Perkins classmate, Guy Garrett, who was entering a Ph.D. program in theology that fall at Boston University. He knew how much Charles enjoyed studying theology himself—maybe, Garrett suggested, he would like to join him. Charles said yes, and in 1965, after securing a job at a church in West Roxbury, he again moved his family, which now included a second son, Guy. He enrolled in postgraduate classes at BU and Harvard Divinity School. "He'd been a pastor for four years," remembered Garrett, "and I think he was ready for a fresh start in a new place."

According to the gospel of Matthew, when Jesus began his public ministry, two millennia ago, the first words out of his mouth were "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." His followers have been trying to parse those charged words ever since. What is this kingdom? Is it inside us, the advent of God's reign in the human heart through faith? Is it some future reality, one in which earthly powers are overthrown? Was Jesus preaching about giving up one's evil ways to be allowed entry into a celestial realm? For John Wesley, who wrote often on the subject, the kingdom of heaven was both a present reality and a future one. As Christians waited for God's fully realized empire to come, his present reign in their hearts—established by grace—would be evidenced in large part by how well they cared for the world around them, loving "every child of man, every human creature, every soul which God hath made."

For the Ecumenical Institute, a radical Christian collective Charles encountered in Boston, the kingdom of heaven was a reality that could, and should, be built on earth right now. Soon after arriving in the city, Charles attended an intense weekend seminar held by the EI, in which attendees slept on cots, ate together, and—when they weren't quoting Bonhoeffer and Tillich—engaged in earnest theological discussions about renewing the church and transforming the world. The EI believed in working from the ground up, emphasizing community development, especially in the country's ghettos.

Charles was captivated. No longer did he have to be a lonely voice cautiously calling for change. The EI, led by a long-haired, guru-like former Perkins professor named Joseph Mathews, was actually *doing* something, in particular for black Americans. As he and Pat attended EI seminars around New England, Charles grew more and more excited about fighting racial injustice. In 1968 he informed his wife that he wanted to take on a bigger role and move to the EI's headquarters, in a ghetto on the west side of Chicago. Pat was not enthused. "He sacrificed the safety of his family by taking us there," she said. But she understood her husband's desire to go, and she felt that following him was her duty. "He would focus on something, especially a situation where he saw innocents suffering. He felt if you could give yourself to solving a problem, you could find a solution."

The family sold their belongings and headed west, moving into the EI's compound in a gang-infested neighborhood, where armed soldiers patrolled the streets in the wake of bloody riots following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. The hundred or so EI members shared houses or bunked in dorm-style apartments. Every morning, they rose at five-thirty, ate breakfast together, and listened to a sermon. Then they went to work, partnering with local residents to help build a preschool, a clinic, and a community center. They also held seminars and brought in new members. Before long, Charles had become one of Mathews's right-hand men, recruiting wealthy donors in the Chicago suburbs, giving sermons, and speaking at large gatherings. "Charles was a charismatic person," said Pat. "People really wanted to follow him."

Charles became known as one of the group's skeptics, often serious, always fearless about giving his opinion. "Heaven is authentic earthly participation," he would say. "This world is it." He was constantly reading, studying, and lecturing; when someone once asked what he did for fun, he replied, "I read Tillich." Eventually he became a teacher, or prior, leading discussions about faith and the EI's role in the world. "He was a good teacher," remembered Louise Singleton, who took a seminar at the compound and became a friend. "He talked about things that were important, that touched your life—things that maybe you weren't comfortable talking about. He was mindful, about his life and others' lives."

Over the course of four years, the Moores were sent to live and work all over the Chicago area, in rich neighborhoods and poor ones. Mathews then set about expanding the EI's reach beyond the U.S., and in 1973 he took Charles on a three-month scouting trip to England, India, Singapore, and the Marshall Islands. The following year, Charles and Pat were sent to India to lay the groundwork for the EI there. Though this required them to leave their two sons behind, Charles did not hesitate; Steve, who was sixteen, was packed off to an EI home in Montana, and Guy, who was eleven, moved in with a group of EI families in Chicago. Pat was torn but still accompanied her husband. "I thought maybe going to India would be the *it* he was looking for," she said, "the thing he could do that would transform the world."

The couple moved to a Bombay slum, where Charles taught classes and searched for a village that would be receptive to the EI's mission, and after a brief return to the U.S., they lived in the village of Maliwada, east of Bombay. While Charles networked with local leaders, Pat managed a community center, rising at three in the morning to oversee the cooks preparing food for villagers. "It was all about building a model," remembered Pat, "working with them on schools, clinics, water systems. I think lives were changed."

But while Charles was inspiring others, he was losing those closest to him. Over the two years that he and Pat spent in India, their boys, shuttled among other families, felt increasingly abandoned. By 1976 Steve had dropped out of high school and was on his own in Illinois; Guy was in the ninth grade in Saskatoon, Canada, and skipping class. "I was in a foreign country," he remembered. "I didn't know anyone at the school and needed direction. I finally stopped going altogether." Pat, meanwhile, was growing unhappy too; as she helped others with their lives, she felt as if her own life was passing her by. In 1977 she returned to the U.S. and retrieved Guy.

Charles, missing Pat and beset with intestinal parasites, followed three months later. He asked the leadership of the United Methodist Church to assign him a congregation and was sent to the small town of Ingleside, near Corpus Christi. Though Pat and Guy moved with him, she left Charles a year later, taking their son with her. Charles felt lost. "He felt his work in India wasn't done," recalled Guy. "He wasn't ready to give it up. He needed to be around people who were suffering to have a purpose in life. He needed to have that mission."

For the next few years, Charles drifted. From Ingleside he moved to Corpus Christi to take a post as associate pastor at a black church, St. Paul's United Methodist. His roommate was a young local minister named Stephen Bryant, who had heard Charles lecture in Chicago. "Charles threw himself into things with abandon," said Bryant, remembering when the pastor went on a fast for the forty days of Lent—and then continued for several days more. The two often talked late into the night. "He had a strong feeling he was on the earth to make a significant impact, and he was searching for how to do that."

A small Methodist retreat on Padre Island was Charles's next post, but that proved too monastic a life for him, so he moved back to his childhood home in Grand Saline, where his mother had continued to live after his father's death, in 1978. Charles had grown depressed, and he would visit Garrett, who was now in Dallas, trying to figure out what to do next. "Being a normal pastor wasn't fulfilling anymore," said Garrett. "After the EI, he had a more challenging view of what the mission of the church should be, a bigger role in taking care of the poor. We'd talk about what he should do: Go back to Chicago? Stay in Texas?" Charles also called Louise Singleton, his former EI student, who lived in Denver. He was a wreck, so depressed that he couldn't get out of bed, he told her. Charles went to visit her and her husband, then agreed to spend a week in a Colorado hospital psychiatric ward.

Charles was consumed with guilt over the way he had behaved toward his sons. The brothers had been sharing an apartment in Houston, and in December 1980 Charles wrote them a forlorn letter. "Once there was a man who had two sons," it began, "and he mistreated them badly." He had been so busy trying to save the world, he explained, that he hadn't saved any time for them. Now he tried to make it up to them, buying Christmas presents and visiting. "We'd sit around and listen to Richard Pryor albums," said Guy. "He loved those records. He'd laugh until he fell out of his chair." Remembered Pat, "It's not that he didn't love his boys. But God as his calling was primary in his life, period. Everything else came after."

By this time the EI had morphed into the Institute of Cultural Affairs, an organization focused less on religious renewal and more on secular community development outside the U.S. In 1981 Charles rejoined the group, traveling around Europe, Africa, and India. In late 1982 he went on a six-week trip, leading workshops and speaking in villages across the globe. In his journal, he bemoaned the treatment of women, described what he saw in African slums, and kept a record of his visits with health care workers, farmers, and tribal chiefs. "I fluctuate between states of excitement over the possibilities of human development and despair over the enormity of human suffering, especially the inadequacy of my response to it," he wrote. Feeling that the ICA was becoming "spiritless and technocratic," he quit in 1984, moving to London to study church history. "I am trying to understand how humanity got to be the way it is," he wrote when he arrived.

He was also on the cusp of fifty and trying to find himself. He'd wake at four, write, read all morning, do research at the library, come home, eat a cold dinner, and read novels until bedtime. He visited Charles Dickens's home, Karl Marx's grave, and John Wesley's chapel. He went to see the statue of William Tyndale, who had been burned at the stake in 1536 for translating the Bible. "This certainly shows how the giving of one's life at the right moment can be of great significance and that the argument against martyrdom because of the uncertainty of its effect is not convincing," he wrote.

When he ran out of money, Charles returned to Texas. He spent time with Guy, who was now in Tyler doing manual labor and little else. "We got pretty close," recalled Guy, "because we were both having a hard time figuring out what we were going to do next." Charles asked the bishop for a new church in 1986, but the Methodists had no vacancies. Instead Charles found a federated congregation—Methodist, Presbyterian, and Church of Christ—in the tiny South Texas town of Woodsboro. Though he liked the ecumenical nature of the church and enjoyed ministering to the many elderly in the congregation, visiting them at nursing homes and hospitals, after three years he asked for a transfer, hoping to move to Austin. The closest he could get was another federated church, this one in Lockhart. It was only an interim position, but Charles took it. He was 55, a temp, and alone.

Charles regained his sense of purpose in 1990, when he was offered a post at Grace United Methodist in Austin. He jumped at the chance to lead the small church in a quiet neighborhood south of the river. When he arrived, he found an aging congregation of about sixty members; the building itself, constructed in 1914, was in disrepair. Charles got to work, rehabbing the choir loft and installing stained-glass windows. He also fixed up an educational annex. Out front, he placed a sign with a slogan that he credited to his new wife, Linda, a real estate agent he'd met at a church workshop in town and married that November: "An Old Church With New Ideas."

Charles took a deliberate attitude of inclusiveness, inviting everyone in the community to join his church or just use it as a gathering place, including a Jewish Reconstructionist group and the Austin Rape Crisis Center. Not long after the sign went up, a young gay man named Andy Smith began attending services. Smith, like Charles, hailed from East Texas and had graduated from SMU; the two hit it off, and Smith began bringing friends. Despite the stance of the United Methodist Church on gays ("We do not condone the practice of homosexuality," read its Book of Discipline, "and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching"), Charles went out of his way to embrace his new congregants. He began preaching sermons on Sunday mornings about how God's gift of grace was meant for everybody, including homosexuals, and even allowed use of the church for meetings of PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) and rehearsals of the Capital City Men's Chorus.

Standing at the pulpit with the air of a kindly professor, Charles read his sermons from the page, speaking calmly, looking up from time to time and cocking his head. His cadence was soothing—sometimes a trace of his East Texas accent would sneak through—but it was what he said that moved people. "Do I have to listen to endless flapdoodle about what the Bible says?" he asked in a sermon about homosexuality. "How brainy does a person have to be to understand that sexuality is not a matter of style but of substance—having to do, that is, with the very core of personality?" He was neither a fist-pounder nor a back-slapper. "He wasn't trying to make people happy," recalled Smith. "He wanted to challenge us to think and explore our faith. He'd say, 'It's not entertainment.'" Rich Brotherton, whose wife, Kathy, was the church organist and choir director, also

remembers those Sundays. "Every sermon, you'd be humbled, moved, and inspired," he said. "Charles would crystallize thoughts in your head, and you'd come away thinking, 'Exactly.' "
Soon all kinds of people were coming to Charles—men just out of prison, women abused by their husbands, the marginalized and the down and out. He provided motel rooms for homeless families and hired John Jordan, a homeless man, as a caretaker. Jordan in turn founded SoCo Ministries, a group that partnered with neighborhood churches to distribute lunches to those on the streets. "Charles ministered to the underdog," said Linda. "He didn't relate to people who had a lot of options and money." Charles found deep fulfillment attending to the sick and the dying, and he spent hours in the hospital, sitting on the beds of those who were ailing, sometimes holding them close. "When people suffered, he suffered with them," recalled Kathy Renfro, a congregant whose dying father Charles comforted. Linda believed he saved his best writing for the dead. "His greatest gift was his eulogies," she said. "He could recreate the person in such a way that you'd laugh and cry at the same time."
As before, though, Charles's mission came before everything else, and Linda grew frustrated when he wouldn't take time off. "He put himself on every committee," she said. "It drove me crazy. On Wednesday night he'd listen to the choir rehearse. I'd say, 'Charles, they don't need you!' But he had to have his finger in every pie." In 1993 the couple split. "I was married to Charles," said Linda, "but Charles was married to the church."
Charles threw himself into his work all the more, marching in Austin's MLK Day parade, joining the board of the Rape Crisis Center, and taking part in protest vigils outside the Governor's Mansion whenever someone was set to be executed. When a new group called the Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty (TCADP) needed a place to meet, Charles offered his church. "Not many ministers would even talk about the death penalty," recalled Dave Atwood, the organization's founder, "but Charles preached about it—and he welcomed us. He was a groundbreaker."
It was gay rights, however, where Charles took his strongest stand. In 1995, when the United Methodist Church convened a meeting of one hundred bishops in Austin, he saw an opportunity and declared a hunger strike to protest the denomination's position on homosexuality, demanding a public statement from the bishops that expressed "their concern about the mistreatment of gay people, especially by church officials." At the time, the issue of gay rights had barely entered the national conversation—"Don't Ask, Don't Tell" had become law just a year earlier—and Charles's actions caught the attention of the city. Thirteen days into his fast, the *Austin American-Statesman* ran a long story on the sixty-year-old minister, noting how he'd lost fifteen pounds and "walked with an older man's shuffle." The next day the bishops drafted a resolution in which they reaffirmed that the practice of homosexuality was incompatible with Christianity yet also called on "each United Methodist congregation to be a place of hospitality where all are welcomed."
Charles ended his strike. "It's not all we hoped for," he told the *Statesman*, "but it's a positive statement." The *Austin Chronicle* gave him an award that year for "Best Gandhi Imitation." Grace United by this time had grown to two hundred members, including families with young children, and though not everyone was happy with Charles—some left the church, others refused to tithe—his fast attracted even more congregants. "I saw a news report and thought, 'Here is a guy literally putting himself at risk,' " recalled Steve Basile, a gay man who moved to Austin around that time. "So I went to Grace. It was this eighty-year-old church with a crazy mix of blue-haired ladies and people with tattoos and piercings."
Charles thought the bishop would replace him, but his contract kept getting renewed. So he grew bolder, devising a plan in 1997 with two other local ministers, including his friend Lou Snead, to connect South Austin churches with Travis County Health and Human Services to provide help to the area's homeless. In a meeting with other ministers to discuss the funds they would raise, one pastor expressed concern that the recipients would try to game the system. "Charles leaned on the table," remembered Snead, "and said, 'That sounds like blaming the poor. If we're going to sit here and blame those in need for their circumstances, I want no part of it, and I can't see how we're going to call it Christian.' " The other pastor backed down.
Charles again refused to mince words a few years later, when he was interviewed on *60 Minutes* about the "compassionate conservatism" espoused by presidential candidate George W. Bush, saying that the concept

wrongly absolved the government of its responsibility. "Just like I wouldn't like to go back to the time before we had flush toilets," he said, bemoaning the era when only churches helped the poor, "I would not like to go back to a time when the only kind of help anybody could expect would be from the generosity of some religious group."

By the time the show aired, Charles was 65 and married for a third time, to Barbara Pierce, the widowed mother of Kathy Renfro. He was also ready to retire, an announcement that left his congregation heartbroken. "No minister had ever had that kind of spiritual effect on me," explained church member Kathy Calnan. He was honored with awards by PFLAG and the TCADP, and on Mother's Day in 2000, two weeks before his retirement date, Charles delivered one of his best sermons, in which he gave loving homage to the United Methodist Church, despite the denomination's unwillingness "to accept and enjoy her other sheep, the children who are different from the majority of the flock." He ended it with a rousing promise.

"I will not become hopeless," he declared. "I will sing and pray and work as long as breath is in me. . . . Someday, I know my mother church is going to embrace all her children without reservation."

Over the course of his long, wandering career, Charles had been a prolific if occasional writer, filling journals, penning third-person autobiographical pieces ("His life . . . had, nevertheless, been pretty much a mess," he wrote in one, noting the "failure of will and lack of accomplishment"), and composing many poems. Some of his poetry was imagistic ("Waves of grass / spread round / your / face") and some topical ("You have broken my heart / And the bones of my friends," he wrote in a piece about Dallas). About life in the ministry, he wrote: "The greatest paradox of all / Is this mysterious call: / In providing something people need / We ourselves don't go to seed." His plan in retirement was to write more consistently—maybe fiction, maybe a book about his life. He and Barbara moved to a condo in Tyler, and in between rough drafts he intended to make regular trips to Grand Saline to fix up his childhood home, which he had inherited after his mother's death, in 1998.

When Charles sat down to write, though, the words wouldn't come. He found himself struggling to make sense of his new life. For the first time in decades, he had no flock and no pulpit. Nor could he find a church he liked. "For several years after he retired, he wasn't even sure there was a God," remembered Renfro. Still, he kept reading and studying, and after he and Barbara moved to Sunnyvale, a suburb east of Dallas, in 2002, he would drive to the Perkins library at SMU to do research. He preached a guest sermon for his friend Charles Cox at Grace United Methodist Church in Dallas, and when his old childhood friend Don Vickery got married, at First Methodist in Grand Saline, Charles performed the wedding.

His family also provided some solace. Guy, who by this time had earned a GED, a bachelor's degree, and a master's in interdisciplinary studies, had gotten married and settled in nearby Allen, just north of Dallas. In late 2004 he and his wife had a son, Zach. "My dad was so happy," recalled Guy. "He would hold Zach and kiss him, and I'd think, 'Who is this man?' It was healing to see that, because I never got that affection." Charles and Barbara moved to Guy's neighborhood, just around the corner, to help care for Zach and his little sister, Chloe, who was born in 2007. Charles would often take them to the park, so proud and protective of his grandchildren that he petitioned the city council to erect a stop sign on the street in front of the playground.

Still, dissatisfaction plagued him. He met Garrett regularly over meals, and the two discussed and exchanged books—often works by the Jesus Seminar, a group of scholars who proposed that Jesus was not divine at all but simply a preacher who fought injustice. Charles also wrote frequent letters, to the director of Baylor University's Institute of Oral History to inquire about the history of lynching in Grand Saline; to the director of a UMC online forum about when the church's language concerning homosexuality was introduced; and to Bishop Janice Huie about opposing the death penalty. ("I will continue to be vocal about the United Methodist stance," she wrote back, "and I am pleased to hear you are doing the same.") Yet when Steve Basile, his old congregant at Grace United, emailed him out of the blue in December 2010 to say that he would always appreciate his "passion, faith, and commitment to equality," Charles confessed to feeling ineffectual. "I have not been active since retirement," he replied.

In 2012 Charles began to suffer some severe gastrointestinal issues, and he grew convinced that he was dying of cancer, as his mother had. Though he was eventually diagnosed with celiac disease, those close to him believe

the ordeal sent him into a dark spiral. "On a deep-down level," said Garrett, "he was asking himself, 'What did you do?' It was gnawing at him. It's not like he saved the world—but who does?"

Unbeknownst to his friends and family, Charles had started formulating a plan, a way to heed his call from God one final time. It required the ultimate renunciation, an idea that he didn't shy away from. "The calling to self-sacrifice has been with me since Sunday School," he wrote. "I've always felt that death for a cause was my destiny." His plan would involve one of the oldest Christian symbols, one found in the very insignia of the United Methodist Church—a symbol of purification, sacrifice, and the Holy Spirit.

This symbol, wrote Charles, represented "the light of justice, the warmth of mercy and the radiance of walking humbly with that Mysterious Power that gives and takes away, but also leads imperfect mortals to a higher plane." Others before him had used it as an expression of selfless offering; Charles had never forgotten, back in the tumult of the civil rights era, the world-famous images of the Buddhist monk Quang Duc, who had harnessed the symbol's power in 1963 to help bring down the South Vietnamese government. With his plan, Charles would be relevant again and as fearless as ever. He would transform the world and give himself completely.

He would set himself on fire.

Charles decided to execute his plan at his soul's home, the SMU campus, on June 23, 2013. He penned appeals to both George W. Bush and the dean of the Perkins School of Theology, William Lawrence, to be read upon his death. He asked Bush for "a change of heart and mind" on the death penalty and Lawrence for help changing the United Methodist Church's official stance on homosexuality. After quoting Tyndale, he wrote, "I aspire to be a son of Tyndale's sacrifice and hope to have daughters and sons in spirit who care about these issues for which I decided it was necessary for me to die."

But he couldn't do it. "My courage failed me," Charles wrote on July 19. "It isn't easy to contemplate, let alone carry out, the ending of one's life." On August 2, he wrote a second letter to Bush and Lawrence. Once again, he couldn't set himself on fire.

Charles abandoned the idea, but as fall and then spring rolled by, he grew more and more withdrawn. He had thought Barack Obama's presidency heralded a new era, but now the gains of the tea party made him despair. He spent less time with his grandchildren. He stopped reading books. He walked around the house quoting Scripture, something he hadn't done since he was a boy. Barbara didn't know what to do. "I want to tell him to snap out of it!" she told her daughter.

Charles chose a new date: June 19, also known as Juneteenth, the anniversary of the day in 1865 when Texas slaves learned they had been freed. He began writing page after page in preparation. He left detailed instructions for a memorial service, to be held at Faith Presbyterian, in which his friend Lou Snead was to officiate and Kathy Brotherton was to play piano, not organ. "I hope the TV stations in Austin will cover the service," he noted. He also wrote a letter to Barbara, apologizing for being "distant and irritable" and expressing how excruciating it was to give up the "pleasures of life" with her. "It isn't important that I be remembered," he wrote, "but that *someone* cared enough to give up everything for the sake of others." He asked her to reach out to his son Steve. "Please tell Stephen that I am sorry we could not relate in a healthy way, and I feel that I failed him badly."

His suicide letter was titled "An Appeal to Power." "I am laying down my life here today," Charles typed on June 16, "in order to call attention to issues of great human concern—especially homosexuality and the death penalty." He placed the letter on his desk, along with other papers, including the business card of CBS News correspondent Bob Simon, who had interviewed him for *60 Minutes*, and a 2013 *New Yorker* story about self-immolations by Tibetans protesting Chinese rule. (One passage, describing the deaths as "a sacrifice for a higher cause" that "should be viewed as different from violence against others or from suicides committed out of personal despair," was underlined.) On June 19, Charles kissed Barbara goodbye and drove to SMU.

But once more, he couldn't kill himself. Charles would make two more failed attempts over the next three days, each time driving away from SMU and each time adding to his rationale in letters. In one titled "Last Appeal," on June 20, he mentioned the recent fiftieth anniversary of the Mississippi slayings of three civil rights workers,

offering his death "to keep the memory of those three brave men alive" and kicking himself for having done so little about racism in his life. (A handwritten postcript on June 21 read, "Another day gone by—another failure —but it is hard to face the flames.") His letter on June 22 invoked "economic justice, especially as it involves racial prejudice." He also apologized for creating "such a horrendous scene on this beautiful campus."

Perhaps because he could not bring himself to defile his beloved school, Charles shifted his focus to his hometown. "O GRAND SALINE, REPENT OF YOUR RACISM," he titled his last letter. In it, he recalled the old stories about Poletown and described how he'd never seen any black faces growing up. "America (and Grand Saline prominently) have never really repented for the atrocities of slavery and its aftermath," he wrote. "What my hometown needs to do is open its heart and doors to black people." He ended by noting, "Many African Americans were lynched around here, probably some in Grand Saline: hanged, decapitated, and burned. . . . I have decided to join them by giving my body to be burned."

On the morning of June 23, Barbara had a doctor's appointment. Charles begged her not to go, but she explained that it was important and she'd be right back. Charles said he needed to go to Grand Saline to check on the family house. Leaving behind his cellphone and his wallet, he got in his hatchback, taking with him his last letter, which he intended to place on the car window. He then headed east, driving on U.S. 80 into town, past the Sonic and the Salt Palace, until he got to the Bear Grounds.

Charles was instantly engulfed in flames. As they burst ten feet into the air, he made a sound—not a scream but a low moan, thought Munn, like an involuntary physical reaction to unbearable pain. She and McPherson rushed to call 911 as Goggans and Mosley ran toward the burning man. By the time the two reached Charles, he was standing, arms raised, and stumbling toward the road. He took about four steps, fell to his knees, then rolled onto his back. Goggans took off his shirt to try to put out the flames; a man named Buddy Lambert, who had rushed across U.S. 80 in a pickup when he saw the fire, did the same.

In the meantime, McPherson and Munn had found a fire extinguisher and called out to Mosley, who sprinted over to grab it, then ran back to Charles to smother the flames. By the time the flames were out, Charles had been on fire for more than a minute. He lay on his back, knees bent and head off the pavement, moaning. Except for his socks and sneakers, all his clothes had been consumed. His nose was gone, his eyes were melted shut, and the bones in his hands were exposed.

The police arrived, then an ambulance and a fire truck. Charles was taken to the town's heliport and flown to Parkland Hospital, in Dallas. With third-degree burns covering 85 percent of his body, he was induced into a coma and put on a ventilator. When Barbara and Guy arrived, doctors told them Charles wouldn't survive, so the two requested that the ventilator be removed. Charles lived for another 45 minutes. After a nurse put a sheet over his body, Barbara hugged her husband. She and Guy prayed, then said their goodbyes.

When friends heard what Charles had done, they wept. Though many of them couldn't understand the feelings of failure he described in his letters—"Charles was the quintessential example of a man trying to do something," said Sid Hall, a friend and fellow Methodist minister—they weren't entirely surprised by his actions. If anyone would choose such a deliberate death, it was Charles. "He was prepared to take radical action at any time," said Stephen Bryant, Charles's roommate in Corpus Christi. "His whole theology was 'You're here for a reason, so throw yourself into your calling, and lay down your life if needed.' He would have agreed that to lose your life is to save it." Pat felt she knew why he did it. "He believed that people changed their lives out of images, and he thought his death would create an image people couldn't erase from their minds."

At first, though, it seemed as if Charles's death had been utterly in vain. He had wanted so badly to make a statement, "suffering only for a few moments but attracting worldwide attention," he wrote—just like Quang Duc. But Duc had alerted the international media beforehand, and the next day his burning was front-page news all over the world. For his self-immolation, Charles had chosen a mostly empty parking lot and a tiny group of startled onlookers. The *Grand Saline Sun* ran a brief story on "an elderly man" who had set fire to himself; Charles wasn't named until two days later, when the *Tyler Morning Telegraph* published a story headlined "Madman or Martyr?" His story finally went national the following day, when the United Methodist News Service picked it up, followed by the *Dallas Morning News* and the *Huffington Post*.

Even then, many reactions, online and in Grand Saline, were negative. Charles must have been mentally ill, reasoned one forum commenter, or had a messiah complex or just wanted attention. He wasn't thinking at all about his family, to say nothing of the witnesses at the Bear Grounds, who were still reeling from the horror they had seen. "For him to be a pastor, a man of God—how dare he?" asked McPherson. Christians criticized Charles's theology—Jesus had already sacrificed himself to right all wrongs—and noted that Charles could have kept working for the things he believed in. His death, wrote a Ph.D. student in an online Methodist forum, "was needless and wasted." Besides, gay rights had never had more support, the use of the death penalty was declining everywhere, and the country had a black president.

Friends and peers, meanwhile, searched for a way to rationalize his last gesture. "His action was a symbol of solidarity with people on the margins," wrote Hall in an online essay. "His action was meant to call us to respond." In a blog post, a reverend in Denton named Jeff Hood observed, "The courage of a passionate follower of Jesus can set the world afire with love." And indeed, Charles's final words and deeds inflamed Grand Saline, especially after Wendi Callaway, the editor of the *Sun*, posted an editorial on Facebook on July 3 defending his actions as a wake-up call. "We all know the history of this town," she wrote. "African Americans were tortured, hung from trees, hung from the Poletown bridge, decapitated and their heads placed on poles in Poletown, burned alive, and God only knows what else."

She received more than one hundred responses, some thanking her for raising the issue, sharing stories of local prejudice and pointing out that in 2014 there were still almost no black residents in Grand Saline. But others attacked her facts. In a long letter, which Callaway published in the *Sun*, several civic leaders stated that, according to research by local historian and author Elvis Allen, much of what she and Charles had written was based on "tall tales and unsubstantiated myths." There was no evidence of a lynching pole in Poletown, they wrote, which in fact got its name from the saplings used by Civil War–era settlers to build homes. They acknowledged that the era of Reconstruction had been violent in the county, and that blacks and sympathetic whites had been beaten and whipped, but there was no record anywhere—no newspapers, historical journals, or oral histories—of a black person being lynched or decapitated in Grand Saline.

These facts probably wouldn't have meant much to Charles. Standing for hours on the cracked gray asphalt in front of the Dollar General, he was answering the call he'd first heard just down the road some 75 years earlier, in the words of Jesus. The Bear Grounds might not have been the best place for his final sermon, but the parking lot fit with how he felt: lonely, melancholic, a little heroic. "He didn't want to just die of some natural cause or get hit by a truck," said Pat. "He wanted his death to count for something. He wanted his life to count for something."

Unfortunately, no matter what Charles did in his life—no matter how many fasts he undertook, hungry people he fed, communities he built, parishioners he inspired, dying he comforted—he would never have thought it was enough. For all the times he preached about God's gift of grace and all the times he extended it to others, Charles, it seems, felt little of that grace himself. Bill Renfro, Kathy's husband and a Methodist minister in Austin, wishes he had had one last chance to talk to his friend. "I would have told him, 'Charles, you may not see the changes, but you've touched so many lives and you've contributed to the progress of history,'" he said. "'Partly because of you, inclusiveness will one day be the byword in the Methodist Church.'"

He paused. "But it wouldn't have made a bit of difference."