

**Jeanette Mott Oxford,
1998 Ethical Society of St. Louis Humanist of the Year**

Jeanette Mott Oxford Sunday, April 26, 1998: Oxford is executive director of Reform Organization of Welfare (ROWEL) and the ROWEL Education Association. ROWEL is a statewide organization that includes people with low incomes and their allies. Through lobbying and public relations, its members work to influence laws and policy decisions that affect their lives. The ROWEL Education Association trains members to become community leaders and stages programs to break down prejudice in the community.

Oxford also is involved in programs in Epiphany United Church of Christ in Benton Park that provide food to the hungry and develop strategies to help families get out of need. In addition, she is active with gay and lesbian justice causes, both at her church and through Other Sheep, an international ecumenical ministry.



Oxford grew up in Southern Illinois and attended Harrisburg Junior College. After dropping out of school, she was a public relations worker, a reporter for a weekly newspaper, a telephone operator and a postal clerk. In 1983, she entered Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, and earned a degree in religious studies in 1986. Three years later, she earned a master's degree in divinity from Eden Seminary.

Since Oxford joined ROWEL in 1991, the number of members has increased from 550 to 1400. Many receive Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, some work but are poor, and others are physically or mentally disabled. "We are one of the few groups that try to get people with low incomes to the State Capitol to visit with their legislators," Oxford says. "Too many public policy decisions that affect people with low incomes never have anyone poor at the table. They who plan how to move people from welfare to work don't ask, 'Will that work in your life?' "

Oxford wants to change Missouri's mindset. ROWEL recently placed members on the state's Welfare Working Partnership and St. Louis' new Community Partnership. In preparation for such tasks, ROWEL provides training in public speaking and parliamentary procedures. ROWEL Education Association's Welfare Simulation program, which sensitizes participants to the realities of life on welfare, is used by educators, religious congregations, social action groups and health-care providers in 25 states. Walking in the shoes of those who are poor, participants try to figure out how to get by on \$300 per month or approach a landlord who won't fix a broken window. ROWEL members act in such roles as landlords, rent collectors, police and pawnbrokers during these simulations. Class members then discuss how society could help people escape from poverty instead of trapping them in it.

Oxford has been active in a variety of other causes, including Bread for the World and Central American issues. And she has helped her church become more relevant to its high-poverty neighborhood. The church has gone through the Just Peace Church Process, which examines links between peace and justice, and the Open and Affirming Church Process, which welcomes gays and lesbians into full life

and leadership in the congregation. Through Other Sheep, Oxford helps raise money to send educational materials to countries that shun or even execute gay people.

Oxford is diffident about receiving honors, however. "I am who I am today because of hundreds of people who have shaped my life and empowered my work," she says. "So I hope this award honors not just me but the whole network of people who care about justice and sharing power and resources."