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How Open Are We to Healing by Healed Healers? One Missionary's Story

Brian Rude

ELCIC missionary in El Salvador

At the national convention last July the ELCIC door opened another crack, not so much to let the outcasts (back) in, though that should never be discouraged, as to let us inbreds out, to where we're called to be. From my vantage point of serving 24 years as ELCIC missionary in El Salvador, that seems to me to be a more Jesus-like way of being the body of Christ. I don't read in the gospels about Jesus inviting people to synagogue, or launching synagogue membership drives, or tallying synagogue attendance statistics, or doing synagogue-planting. Jesus' mission was to go out to meet folk in the market, at table, along the road as well as in official holy places, and there offer them the reign of God, in all of its down-to-earth diversity. This is incarnation—not just being born in Bethlehem, but doing ministry throughout Galilee and into Gentile territory, culminating in Jerusalem itself and crucifixion on Golgotha.

I could tell many prison and back-alley stories about Jesus and the reign of God present among criminals, gangs, the violent, the delinquent, those on-the-edge, or even over-the-edge. But this past summer's ELCIC door opened around sexuality, which has little to do with barriers of class or crime. So the following vignettes derive from that realm of my reign-of-God experience.

When the Lutheran church of El Salvador was exploring the theme of sexuality some years ago, the bishop commissioned a female Salvadoran pastor to form a panel to lead discussion in a variety of church settings. I was asked to serve on the panel. Other members seemed less likely candidates, at least from a "church" perspective. One was a drag queen, another a trans person, another openly gay. One was living publicly with HIV. Yet another was a sex-worker-turned-activist among her network of colleagues. None but the coordinator and myself was Lutheran. All were outspoken and eloquent. All had much to tell, based on their diverse lives and rich experiences. They were acknowledged as the experts in the Lutheran spaces we visited. In clergy clusters and clergy study conferences we facilitated discussions on every aspect of sexuality. We fielded any and all questions at youth gatherings. We hosted two-hour radio talk shows. "Those people" were the Good Samaritans—outcasts healing and guiding the insiders. To date, I have heard only positive comments about this daring venture.

Late one afternoon, after an intense day in a remote Lutheran radio studio, we were dropping one of the panel members off in her marginal neighbourhood—her "barrio." My eyes--those with pupils, irises and retinae, but also my lenses of faith--were drawn to a sign across the street from her home. It hung over the sagging gate opening onto stacks of wrecked cars. *Chatarra Jesús*, it read: "Jesus' Junkyard." I mused on the feasibility of such a

sign for our van-load of cast-asides—or for any congregation, or, indeed, for the entire body of Christ.

A global space I have come to appreciate as more body-of-Christ than the church itself is the biennial Global AIDS conference. It brings together medical personnel, workers in non-governmental organizations, Buddhists, sex workers, academics, educators, drag queens, politicians, Muslims, students, trans and indigenous persons, scientists, Jews, business folk, youth, persons living with HIV, and Christians of every stripe and colour. The event is divided into two primary areas. The larger area is for the formal presentations, usually with a medical or scientific focus, from plenary sessions to all manner of workshops. The other is the "Global Village"---the arts and culture fairgrounds, so to speak—a more social space where dozens of organizations have booths, speakers, singers, dancers, actors on numerous stages and screens.

At the summer 2010 event in Vienna, I felt most at home in two of these Global Village venues. In one, I accompanied the Salvadoran "CoCoSI" (Committee Against AIDS) team, as I have done for over a decade in El Salvador. They were one of 25 winners of the United Nations Red Ribbon award, recognized for community work around HIV/AIDS. Our most immediate neighbours in that space were Buddhists from Thailand, sex workers from Argentina, gays from Mexico, and drug users from Russia. Language differences seemed a minor barrier as we shared our mutual mission together for a week, using a wide range of communication techniques, from smiling to dancing, video to theatre, photos to sculpture, posters to books, music to holding hands, along with hugging and marching through the streets of Vienna. Nobody left feeling they hadn't made a difference or hadn't been inspired for the ongoing challenges.

Across a hallway fashioned from curtains was the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance (EAA) space. I had attended their pre-conference workshop with about 300 others and had visited this space on occasion throughout the conference. As the conference drew to a close, I sat in on their evaluation session. They expressed disappointment at the low number of visitors attracted to their space and their apparently low overall impact on the event as a whole. One way to remedy this for future conferences, they concluded, was for more ecumenical Christians to delve into academic studies, the results of which could then be presented in the formal part of the conference. I am in full support of such study, being immersed in it myself. But it seems to me that a more incarnational response—more Jesus-like, more body-of-Christlike— would be for these "church" folk to be crossing that makeshift hallway, joining the everyday life being celebrated in that marvellous UN space, getting to know that diverse humanity there as they, compared life experiences and mission notes.

One prominent global church leader told how he had ventured such a rash move at a previous conference. He had visited the lounge set aside for those living with HIV, a space where these "Samaritans" could rest, retreat, recharge, regroup. I was surprised, first of all, that it wasn't until the end of the third decade of the HIV / AIDS epidemic that he had first entered such a space. I was also surprised by his surprise at the gracious reception he had

received. I had long since discovered how such outcasts far outdo us "inbreds" at being gracious hosts, even to those who have cast them out.

Our wounded ELCIC is in need of healing. Over these decades of difficult and often painful debate, I have maintained close contact with dozens of those who have been driven out of our "church" and dozens more who could have been our potential partners in mission. They have gone through amazing and diverse journeys of healing and growth. And they have never hesitated to be gracious hosts to me, in a wide diversity of spaces, ranging from their homes to gay pride parades, in spite of my being on the inside of an organization that has consistently shut the door in their face. I'm sure they are open to being our healers, if we would be open to that opportunity. For as much as the traveller left beaten on the side of the road required the healing care of that Samaritan, we surely need the welcoming, healing hand of these present-day Good Samaritans.