

## Experiencing “Otherness”

*Reflections on my Immersion Experience provided by the Lutheran AIDS Network (LANet) in San Bernadino, CA January 15-19, 2010*

*“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in,” Matthew 25:35*

It is difficult for most people to be a stranger. We experience a discomfort from our lack of information necessary to navigate the basic systems we need to survive. Where will we be sheltered? What will we eat? How will we communicate? Who will take care of us? We find a degree of vulnerability has entered into our existence. We become dependent on the assistance of others to overcome these new challenges and to re-establish our comfort. People of privilege when traveling often purchase that assistance in the form of hotel rooms, restaurant meals, foreign language dictionaries, concierge service... I know, because I have been blessed with the means to occasionally travel, and have enjoyed the adventure of the uncertainty and discovery, but I recognize that however marginally, marginally I still had control over my circumstances. No matter how different accommodations were from what I was accustomed to, there was always an end in sight and a return to my comfortable life in Philadelphia.

For five days I tried to not think about that comfort, and instead to surrender to the moment of living in a very different community, where vulnerability is part of day-to-day living. God is the mercy giver in very tangible ways through the people of Central City Lutheran Mission. I recognized that I could not possibly expect to completely understand the experiences of those I stayed with and ate with and met, but I prayed that I would be able to look at their lives with new eyes.

Perhaps the most difficult lessons I needed to learn on this trip were about control and trust. Early on my first afternoon, walking to CCLM from the home where I was staying, I had my first experience with some of the anxiety my housemates frequently experience.

Not far from the house, three young guys suddenly piled out of a car across the street from me. From behind, I heard “Hey, where ya goin?!” I kept walking until I heard a second “Hey man!” so I stopped, turned around and said “Hey” back at them. The guy then said “What’s that under your arm man? Is that a Bible?” at which point I said “Yeah” and he mumbled “Never mind!” and then he added something that sounded like “God bless ya” and they disappeared down a driveway.

Later that evening I learned from one of my roommates how many people in the neighborhood look down on them because they live in the “AIDS house” and that I should be careful when I was traveling back and forth, that gay people weren’t looked on very favorably by many people in the neighborhood. He told me I was really brave to live there with them.

So, a simple little leather bound, gilt-edged NRSV Bible seemingly helped me avoid some potential unpleasantness, perhaps because they assumed I was clergy. I wonder if they would have even tried to stop me if they hadn't seen me leaving "The AIDS House" That day I truly felt I had been protected by God's Word.

The next morning, traveling the same route, I felt less anxious. Arriving at CCLM I asked where Mass was to be held. I was given a warm welcome by Pops, who led me to the sanctuary and then left me. Personal belongings were packed under the pews everywhere. I assumed all of the guests would want to be with their stuff during the service, so I kept looking for a clear space-there was none. I sat toward the back, thinking I could move if I was in someone else's area. I wondered what the rules or guidelines were that brought some order to the storage of 60 plus people's belongings. I knew where my bed was that night, but I wondered what it must be like to come to this place for the first time, how did one learn the rules, and how did one find an available place? How did you figure out how to avoid offending someone? How long did it take before you fit in?

How many of those questions were part of the everyday existence of someone new to this country? How much more difficult was it if you did not speak English? What if you were constantly afraid of being discovered as an "illegal" and returned to a place you had given up on because you felt it had given up on you? What if you suspected you might have a disease that was life-changing, but you weren't prepared to change your life?

Things were very different there in the CCLM sanctuary compared to my church at home. Between the visual elements, use of a language I'm not able to speak or understand, and unfamiliar music, there were enough things to remind me of my "otherness." On the other hand, the shape of worship was close enough to what I am familiar with, that I could always feel like I was participating in the liturgy. By the final day, I had finally mastered the words and the intonation of "*Santo, santo, santo es el Señor. Dios del universe. Santo es el Señor.*"

I will never sing or say those words in English without hearing the community of St. Martin on Sunday morning.

### **What Has God Called Me to Do as a Result of this Trip?**

My home congregation has a 21-year old ministry with people who are at-risk, affected/infected with HIV/AIDS. It centers around hospitality and a meal with an emphasis on respecting the value and dignity of all of our guests (which can present a challenge from time to time) We begin the evening with an optional discussion on the Bible texts for the coming Sunday's worship. The evening concludes with volunteers and a few guests gathered around the baptismal font for Compline.

For the first 12 years our primary partner in the ministry was a local organization called *We the People (Living with AIDS)* and they helped us reach out to the people we sought to engage. A political change in the city of Philadelphia shifted AIDS prevention efforts from protection to abstinence, and *We the People* lost their city funding. We continued

with some of the volunteers and clients continuing to attend Tuesday night dinners, but many of our guests were now more people living at-risk, and less were from the HIV positive community.

Based on some things I learned in San Bernadino, and some research made since I've returned, I've reached a conclusion that one area where people living with HIV/AIDS might benefit from some new programming and educational opportunities is in being better informed about managing their overall health. Many assiduously follow their HIV medical routines, but often ignore other health indicators of issues like diabetes, heart disease, visual and oral health. Thanks to medical advances many people are living longer lives despite their positive diagnosis, only to be struck down by other treatable diseases.

We also know that many people living on their own find it challenging to maintain a health diet. Many of the delivered meals offer nutritional balance, but when ordinary challenges of shopping with limited food budgets, convenience often wins out over nutrition.

Looking at what resources we already have to use, between the physical space, the proximity of two institutions with Food Sciences Programs, and two institutions with Medical Schools, I'd like to bring these resources together and invite the AIDS/HIV community to a monthly Saturday gathering where nutrition and food prep might be part of assembling a group meal, which might be followed by a health care related guest speaker who might focus on a specific topic such as diabetes or high cholesterol. I'd hope to involve some pre-screening capabilities such as blood pressure testing. Before investing substantial work in planning these workshops it would be necessary to be sure we're not attempting to duplicate something which already exists.

Another way which the immersion experience has called me to action has been to plan a Prayer Vigil on the University of Pennsylvania Campus during the week of Prayer for Healing of AIDS. This will be an interfaith effort with the local Metropolitan Community Church, and will be held on March 9<sup>th</sup>.

Fred Wolfe  
University Lutheran Church of the Incarnation  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

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One of the many wall murals at Central City Lutheran Mission depicting the rights of children as defined by the United Nations Declaration for Human Rights. This mural depicts the right of youth to have shelter. “Build more schools and housing and fewer prisons” is the caption.



The St. Martin Chapel located on CCLM's property has been a home for homeless men during winter months since 2003. More than 450 unduplicated clients sleep at CCLM during the winter months. It is the only winter shelter for homeless men in the area.