

A Picture of Jesus

Connecting without Compromising: The Salvation Army and the Gay Community

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Scene one: From the ministry of a friend of mine (visit to a private residence):

“As I knocked on the door of the apartment I prayed: ‘God I don’t know the man behind this door. What I do know is that he’s gay and that he needs to experience your love. Help me to love this man.’ I was somewhat taken aback by the flamboyant figure who greeted me as the door opened. He invited me in and seemed thrilled to see me – thrilled to see anyone. Minutes into the conversation, he looked at me and said: “I have experienced nothing but hate and bigotry from the church for over 40 years. Why should I trust you?” This was my moment. ‘I did not come here to judge you, but to show you Jesus Christ. Your issues with God are between you and him. I’m here to be a friend to you.’”

And somewhere therein lies the crux of the difficult and complex relationship between the gay and evangelical communities, in particular The Salvation Army. It a fairly lengthy history marked largely by misunderstanding and uninformed assumptions, scapegoating and cowardice, fear, secretiveness, bigotry and just plain obtuseness. On both sides.

Back in the late 80’s things got quite heated for a while, apparently sparked by an editorial in our otherwise tame War Cry that somehow fell into the hands of the less-than-tolerant people at *Xtra!*, Toronto’s gay flagship newspaper. The guys and gals at *Xtra!* went crazy and started printing all sorts of incendiary nonsense in an effort to rally their community to do something about us. I even got into the act, living as I did in TO’s gaytown at the time, and wrote some letters to *Xtra!* daring them to have the courage to publish my rather arrogant and naïve missives. Understandably, nothing I sent in was ever published.

The Army bobbed and weaved its way through the

issue until the gay resistance settled down to an annual boycott of our Christmas kettle effort, still in effect. There are periodic breaches of the ceasefire as in 1992 when Toronto Mayor June Rowlands refused to allow the Army to use Nathan Phillips Square for our annual Red shield kick off due to our “discriminatory policies”. Matters settled down to a surly hostility, a mutual wariness and distaste.

I cannot really speak about the rest of the country but know that in Toronto the relationship between “us” and “them” is strained, to say the least. To be really blunt, “they” hate “us”, and I’m not too sure but that it might be reciprocal. Our opinion of each other has been long decided and neither side seems willing to make any revisions. Or maybe it is not so much unwillingness as an uncertainty, a confusion.

We have worked hard at 614 to gain access to local schools in order to help in relationship building with children in Regent Park and to raise our profile, weaving us into the fabric of community life in our “parish”. One of the junior highs has denied us access because they have several openly gay teachers on staff who would be “uncomfortable” in allowing a “homophobic organization” such direct access to their charges.

Inflammatory rhetoric seems to be de rigueur - “they” have their propaganda and we have “ours”. Never mind that our human rights and religious freedoms are being trampled on and that we could have cried foul for discrimination based on religious beliefs; never mind that our distinct lack of homophobia is displayed through the hundreds of gay men and women who received assistance in numerous forms from the Salvation Army of a daily basis and that no one has ever been refused help due to their sexual orientation or lifestyle. (“The Salvation Army upholds the dignity of all persons. For this reason, and in obedience to the example of Jesus Christ, whose compassionate love is all-embracing, The Salvation Army does not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation

in the delivery of its services...”). Never mind all that. In this particular theatre perception *is* reality and that perception is usually crafted by others.

It cuts both ways, unfortunately. Lest we get too self-righteous and feel that we alone are the victims, a quick cruise of the website www.godhatesfags.com should shame into silence anyone bearing the tag of evangelical (as an interesting aside, this website is easily accessed on the Army’s sallynet network even though a multitude of other, less repulsive sites are banned). We too share a burden of guilt.

So, what is to be done? This is a question we have been wrestling with at 614 since our inception. Toronto contains the third largest gay population in North America after San Francisco and New York. They have a high public profile (Pride Day celebrations every June draw more visitors to Toronto than any other single event from across the world, bring several million dollars into city coffers and is endorsed and attended by the Mayor and other public figures) as well as huge political clout (of the three MPs representing the Rosedale-Centre political riding in downtown Toronto - municipal, provincial, federal – two are gay). And yet gays remain possibly the most hurting, lonely and misunderstood sub-culture within our society. And the last place most of them would ever think of turning to is the church, particularly an evangelical church.

At 614 we have made tentative forays into accessing the downtown gay community but it is hard going and very confusing for “them” and “us”. Fear and mistrust are the most common emotions. Defensiveness and hostility permeates everything it seems.

The problem for we evangelicals as Biblical Christians who hold to an essentially fundamentalist (I know, I know - a loaded term!) view of the Bible and God and sin and salvation and all the rest is that our usual mission praxis kind of falls apart here. The typically applied “hate the sin, love the sinner” has been rendered inoperable by the gay community. We can take such a position with alcoholics and addicts, with criminals, prostitutes, with almost any particular constituency mainly because we can separate the person from the sin that they have embraced. I mean few people are going to argue us that alcoholism is a positive thing or an alternate lifestyle, right?

Within the gay community, disentanglement of the sin and sinner is not possible – they have made it so deliberately. Acceptance of the sinner (as we have tried to do) means necessarily acceptance of their sin (which we

cannot do) as they define themselves and find their identity in this orientation and the subsequent - inevitable - actions it produces. According to the doctrine of the gay lobby, orientation without action is not possible, if a person is gay he or she will engage in homosexual acts. Orientation is defined by action based on that orientation. Therefore our evangelical/Salvationist construct (“...The Salvation Army believes that God’s will for the expression of sexual intimacy is revealed in the Bible, and that living fully in accordance with biblical standards calls for chastity outside of heterosexual marriage and faithfulness within it...”) is not understood and completely rejected. It renders dialogue, let alone relationship, all but impossible.

So we are at an impasse. To accept a gay man or a lesbian woman is to accept their lifestyle, condone it and affirm it as right. For most of us this would mean a compromise of principle as Biblical Christians. Yet the call is there, the pull toward a constituency of people whose fear and distrust and lostness is so evident in spite of their surface brashness and brazen overcompensation. Engage with a member of the gay community - whether it be a leather-clad muscleboy in a downtown coffeeshop, an old queen in a shabby rooming house, a tattooed lesbian on fightnight at a local boxing club or a former officer in his meticulously kept apartment on a cold winters evening, and the unease is there. Always.

All else aside, what this does mean is that a degree of intelligence and even sophistication needs to be applied toward mission in this context. A level of skill, of craft, well-honed with deep thought and breadth of knowledge and understanding that is so often lacking in our mission endeavours. We need to approach engagement with the gay community with the same degree of commitment and preparation as we would apologetics or ethics or world religions. It is a complex issue and in fact, is not even one issue, but many.

We must be prepared to understand and accept that there will be people who are interested in the Gospel and those disinterested. That some people we will attract to Jesus and others we won’t even interest. We need to be prepared to understand that there are openly gay men and women who identify themselves with Christ and consider themselves Christians. The disagreement here will be in interpretation of Biblical injunctions and we may just have to agree to disagree. Heretics to be combated? Or hurting, broken people trying somehow to find a peace with God, however incomplete.

The answer is to focus not on the sin but on Jesus.

Sounds simple, but once we understand -I mean really understand - the realization that we cannot convert anyone, that in fact this is the job of the Holy Spirit - to convict and convert, then a way opens. Our job is simply to show them a picture of Jesus. As a friend of mine says, to “place people in the way of God’s grace by virtue of my encounter with them trusting the Holy Spirit within me”. It is about reconciliation and love, aspects of God’s plan that he has entrusted to us (2 Corinthians 5:16-21), and not condemnation and judgement which he has reserved as his exclusive purview (John 5:19-23).

How hard it is for us not to name sin and go after it. We want to identify it and define it and shape it to cover people’s lives and cloak their actions like ill-fitting hairshirts. But at the end of the day, the issue is God’s identity and not ours, God’s love and forgiveness and grace toward God’s children and God’s efforts to reach down to them - to us. He has far less need of our zealous defense of him than we think.

Jesus was considered a traitorous outcast for his embrace of societal misfits and blatant sinners whether they were tax collectors, prostitutes, non-Jews, heretics, whatever. As he walked amongst these people, supped with them, accepted them as his friends, even partied with them, noticeable things happened.

Firstly, his censure by the religious establishment was almost total and unanimous. Secondly, the broken people he hung out with became transformed in his presence. Rarely, if ever, was Jesus proactive in naming their sin and in detailing what steps were needed to get things sorted.

People seemed to know they were sinners already. What they needed was a strong acceptance in order to have the courage and faith to make the changes they all along wanted to - Zaccheus, Matthew, the Woman at the Well. Jesus’ inclusive acceptance and attractive holiness called out to the best in people. Being in Jesus’ presence, seeing him, having a relationship with him, was enough to move them toward God and toward wholeness. So there is an imperative for us to *be*, more than to *do*.

Scene two: From the ministry of a friend of mine (visit to Metropolitan Community Church – Canada’s premier gay and lesbian congregation):

“I entered through a locked door that led to their office area. I met the receptionist, a lady in her 50’s. I was wearing my 614 jacket and as I spoke I could see that she could not take her eyes off my 614 patch (which incorporates the Salvation Army’s Red Shield). I explained the purpose of my visit. Sceptically she said: ‘The symbol on your jacket represents homophobia.’ I explained: ‘We’re not all like that and I am sorry people have represented themselves that way. For us this symbol represents reconciliation for people to God and to each other. It’s about showing people God’s love.’ She gave me the most peculiar stare. Later as I exited the building I could hear her speaking behind my back to another person: ‘Come here - look at that! He is Salvation Army and he isn’t anything like what you would think they are.’”