

REFLECTIONS ON THE NIGHT MINISTRY IN SAN FRANCISCO (sfnightministry.org)

ANTICIPATIONS

After the night ride with the Berkeley Police, I had the hope that some of my questions concerning the problems of violence, drug abuse and the cry for help in them would come into a different perspective. Essentially, I wondered if a minister (lgbtreligiousarchives.org/profiles/chuck-lewis) confronted with the same problems as the police would handle them in a more pastoral way.

THE STREETS

By walking through the streets of the Tenderloin I saw a different face of the city which attracted so many people including myself to realize some of their dreams. As a European, I had no previous experience with this ugly side of the city, all I saw before I came here was the television series "The Streets of San Francisco", and, since then, the nice places where people take you when they want to show you "their" city. It was a very contrasting, sad, and disturbing experience. On a visible level, most striking was the big difference between the fancy shiny hotels on the one hand and the tired and sometimes angry eyes of the people we encountered on our way. Can there be real help for those people who are neglected and, if possible, forgotten by exactly those people who live so close in the fancy hotels?

From a pastoral standpoint it was also a frustrating experience. I was overwhelmed by the large number of people for whom the question was mere survival when some of us, in our comfortable churches, talk about fulfilling lives. But it was also a growing experience because I became conscious of new and important questions I have not asked before. Do people not live in the streets in Switzerland or was I not aware of it? What is the connection between my expectations to fulfil my personal dreams and the hope of these people to find the power and the money to transform their survival into fulfilling lives?

THE BARS

I was more doubtful about the possibility of doing ministry by going to the same bars each week. Chuck mentioned Castro and Polk Street as two areas where he regularly goes. The general danger seems to be that one is only talking with the people who regularly show up as well -- and those are not necessarily the neediest ones. On the other hand, it was convincing when Chuck told us that regular attendance is helpful in building relationships. How long it takes to build a relationship of trust with the customers in such a bar became clear to me when Chuck talked about people's images of clergy and their expectations. A clerical person must overcome a lot of false expectations concerning his or her personal interest. It seems to me, that Fundamentalists create a lot of these false expectations in the greater public. The result is that if a pastor does not try "to save" them, the people seem to get suspicious. Nevertheless, especially after talking to other people in the class and about their experiences, another question remains. I am wondering if such a regular bar attendance can become

ministry to the minister rather than providing a place of openness where the minister encounters the unknown and unexpected in need.

TO BE THERE OR TO BE MORE

It was interesting for me to connect this experience with the experience of a friend from seminary who is working part time as a bartender. He was telling me how many people try to share their problems with him. I am really torn between the way Chuck tries to do ministry, by wearing his clerical collar all the time to indicate that he is the minister and doing ministry "incognito" as my friend as a bartender does. Could it be that the role of the pastor, clearly visible and recognizable by the clerical collar, makes a positive difference?

In the beginning, I thought the way Chuck works is basically by being present -- in the bars and in the streets. But being there as a pastor means also bringing some skills and a presence that might represent more than just another pretty face," namely the presence of God mediated through that role. I experienced Chuck as quite tough when he was talking to people on the street. This attitude became especially visible in his dealing with alcoholics. In his opinion the alcoholic must decide to stay sober first. The question, "In what way can the minister support a person, who obviously has problems with willpower to make this decision?" remains open for me.

THE HOT LINE SERVICE

From all Chuck was sharing, the hotline crisis phone service the Night Ministry offers each night from 10 pm until 4 am seemed a most successful approach to me. This might be a somewhat distorted image because the people in the streets did not approach Chuck as often as usual for, he was already with company. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the possibility of having somebody to talk to in a situation of grief, crisis, or ongoing loneliness without having to go somewhere is very helpful. The person who is calling can be referred to every other social agency in the city where the suffering one eventually will get an adequate long-term treatment. At this point some of my questions were answered. The Street and Night ministry is clearly working as part of a larger network of other social agencies and facilities. This is an important part of the Night Ministry, because the crisis counseling on the phone, or in some cases also in person, is mostly a short-term treatment.

IMPLICATIONS

One important benefit from this walk with Chuck was the increase of my personal awareness. Walking through the streets and drinking in the bars of Zurich and Basel will probably become a slightly different experience. I am planning to check with the council of the Swiss Reformed church in Zurich regarding the need and possibility for Street and Night ministry. Another possibility might be to see how city churches could build up a combined Street and Night ministry. First, this would mean to share the responsibility for the city of which those churches are part of. Second, it would constitute an important ongoing reality check for local pastors. Such a combined Street and Night ministry could therefore achieve two major goals, namely it would become more effective because more people at different places are involved, and as a reality check, it would also enhance the meaning and significance of the work in general for each individual minister.