

Journey of a Transvestite

Santiago Álamo worked in a brothel and tried to find happiness as a woman. But he discovered the love of Jesus at Remar, one of Spain's most dynamic outreach ministries.

Santiago Álamo offers a welcoming smile as he greets guests in front of what used to be a luxury brothel in the days of Francisco Franco, Spain's civic leader from 1939-1975. The old building rests atop a green hill overlooking Madrid. A few guys hang out in the yard, busying themselves with nothing in particular. A couple of young women chat happily in a doorway.

All are part of the property's present, not its past. The brothel is no more. It's a friendly place now, ridded of its dehumanizing past, thoroughly redeemed.

Like Santiago.

In his former days he was a showgirl in the Spanish Canary Islands, living out his life as a transvestite. He was also a drug addict—and as a result, became a less appealing transvestite—run down, worn out, at the end of his road.

The young man smiling on the hilltop is neither a transvestite nor a drug addict. He is the Santiago of today—reborn and recreated by the power of Jesus Christ.

For 10 years he has been serving God with Remar, a ministry based in Spain that is as big as it is unknown to the church worldwide. Remar—short for “rehabilitating the marginalized” and the Spanish infinitive “to row”—runs rehab centers, offers humanitarian aid and does social work.

It also maintains a widespread international presence by planting churches—which now are in 47 cities in Spain and in hundreds of locations in 46 other countries, including the United States, Russia, Germany and China. The ministry is spreading across Latin America, growing rapidly, and has been planted in many African countries. Plans are under way for new centers in Israel and Cuba.

Although other ministries serve drug addicts in Spain—notably Betel and Reto at the national level—Remar has outgrown them all and expanded beyond even its own expectations at the international level.

Santiago's transformation by the power of Jesus Christ is in no way atypical of what Remar has seen accomplished in the lives of thousands of individuals. Though heartbreaking, his story is remarkable and faith-stretching.

"I grew up watching my mother suffer," Santiago says. "Father had left. There were five children to feed and little money. I longed to help mother manage the house, but she declined, saying it was woman's work. My response was to develop feminine emotions."

At age 13 he became a homosexual, but he wanted to become "a real woman," so he started taking hormones. By 14 his looks had turned feminine, and he found his way into the music-hall scene as a transvestite dancer. At 19 he started smoking heroin.

"They told me you don't get addicted smoking, and I believed them," he says. "After some time, when I realized I was [dependent], I was thrown into a depression. My body decayed

fast, and I was dropped as a dancer.

"I started prostituting myself, and at first I earned more money than ever, and took more drugs. But the drugs ruined my body progressively, and then I got AIDS, and before long I could not make much on prostitution either."

Things began to change soon after Santiago woke up in the hospital and learned he had been admitted while in a coma caused by an overdose. He decided to stop taking drugs but soon went back to his old life. It was then that one of his brothers told him about Remar and God's love for him.

"I almost beat him up!" Santiago exclaims. "God? Love me?" he says, but adds with a smile, "The seed grew within me."

In 1990, at 27, Santiago left the Canary Islands. He was a wreck and was headed for Vitoria in northern Spain where Remar is headquartered. He knew the staff were Christians who offered to rehabilitate drug addicts, and even though religion meant nothing to him he believed he had nothing to lose.

"I joined their so-called first phase to get off the drugs. There were ups and downs. I ran away, got invited back again, changed locations—but those people did not let go. I could not figure them out. The whole thing was totally new to me."

Santiago says he eventually made it through "cold turkey," or withdrawals, but that he still was fundamentally the same. "They kept preaching to me about Jesus, and at a point I decided to give it a try. That is when the change started."

Over a two- to three-month period he cut his hair, which he says cost him “many tears.” His conversion occurred during his work assignment in the Remar center’s rabbit stable. It was there that he prayed for forgiveness and was overcome by an “incredible peace.”

Later he worked in the center’s cattle stable, and while “sweating out the hard, physical work,” as he puts it, it occurred to him profoundly that God wanted him to be a man.

“I had cut my hair, but I still had breasts,” he explains.

His breasts were surgically removed, and in the process doctors determined that Santiago no longer had AIDS. He has had more than a dozen tests over a period of many years, and he remains HIV-negative.

Now 38, Santiago leads the Christian community that calls the former brothel home. He is also a Christian TV producer broadcasting the resurrection power of Jesus to the people of Spain.

Kicking the Habit

With very few exceptions, the staff of Remar are like Santiago—former “clients.” Currently some 15,000 staff members and clients live in Remar communities worldwide. Miguel Diez, founder and president, told Charisma that Remar has reached 80,000 of Spain’s 400,000 drug addicts since the ministry’s inception in 1982. He says 25,000 of them have been converted and that 3,000 “are still with us, as soldiers.” Many of these have been sent out to plant Remar ministries in other countries.

Prophetic ministers currently speak of Spain's key missionary role to come in the years ahead, yet as a result of Remar, Spanish Christians already are evangelizing in many of the toughest places around the globe. It is an exceptional ministry in at least four ways.

Miracles. While visiting a number of Remar centers and the annual Remar conference in Madrid in late summer Charisma met with scores of people who had experienced life transformations similar to Santiago's.

The receptionist of one Remar center took drugs for 20 years before coming to Christ. The leader of another center used heroin intravenously for six years before God set him free.

At the Remar conference, hundreds of ex-prostitutes, homosexuals and lesbians flocked the assembly hall. Most of Remar's pastors are former drug addicts.

Finances. Ramón Ubillos, who directs nongovernmental operations for Remar, explained to Charisma that the ministry pays for itself with the various Remar businesses. Work is an essential part of the rehabilitation program, and Remar runs hundreds of second-hand shops, furniture outlets, garages, cleaning companies and more. All are managed by former clients and manned by current clients.

Remar tithes 10 percent of its income to developing nations. The rest covers most of the ministry needs, including expansion costs.

"We receive very few pecuniary donations," Ubillos says,

noting that there is a ministry policy against fund raising on TV and radio programs Remar operates. "But Remar teams regularly visit shops and companies to ask for gifts-in-kind," he adds. "And we actually never pay for any of the food or clothes we need."

Therapy. Remar applies the old monastic principles of ora et labora—prayer, work and discipline only. The rehabilitation program does not include any medication or medical help. From day one, when a drug addict moves into a "first-phase" center he or she (in strictly separated houses) is exposed to prayer and preaching of the gospel.

Clients must abide by strict rules. There is a ban on drugs of all descriptions and on nonapproved magazines and music. During the first phase of recovery, there can be no marital sexual relationships, and in all phases extramarital and nonmarital sexual relationships are forbidden.

Philosophy. Remeros, or "oarsmen" as they are called, live in mostly primitive communities. No one is allowed to have any private property.

Diez—with the focused intensity of a visionary and a style of communication betraying no trace of hesitancy—stated to Charisma during lunch in his community home in a Madrid nature reserve that unless a Christian gives up all of his or her possessions, then that person is "not a disciple—by Jesus' own definition."

The principle of God's economy is "distributive justice," he exclaims. "If you receive more than you need, and do not give it away, you are guilty of injustice," he says.

With no more than the slightest touch of self-irony, Diez states: “Remar is the only nation on earth with no poor people. Everybody gets what he or she needs.”

While preaching at Remar’s annual conference, Diez scoffed at “big-time preachers” who require “hundreds or even thousands of dollars” to preach a single sermon. He said that God’s servants ought to study 1 Timothy 6 and learn to be content with “food and clothing.”

Because of this message, pastors around the world do not line up to invite Diez to preach in their churches. For years, churches in Spain did not recognize Remar. After it was registered as a church in the mid-1990s and became more of a “regular player,” at least formally, the situation improved.

Still, the many church leaders Charisma met with in Spain said very little about Remar—the biggest ministry in the country, a producer of amazing results in people’s lives and by far Spain’s biggest church export.

Rebuilding for Life

On a recent afternoon, Pedro Navarro, a retired businessman and one of the very few remeros who doesn’t have a “dropout” background, leads guests on a site visit to a Remar first-phase community outside Madrid.

The property was abandoned when purchased and will be renovated by the new residents themselves—the standard Remar procedure, as Navarro points out.

Entering the dorm requires climbing a mound of sand and circling a concrete mixer. The staircase is still without steps, but the rooms and utilities have been restored nicely. The house rules are taped onto every door. After sunset, everyone gathers in the yard for devotions, a form of evangelism.

At a first-phase center many of the clients are neither “clean” yet nor converted. One or two crouch on their chairs with glazed eyes, appearing unaware of the surroundings. The Gypsy pastor of the nearest Remar church, who is leading the gathering, and a Gypsy guitarist are the only ones singing aloud.

After worship Navarro preaches a spontaneous message. When two of the men stand up to receive Jesus, he is in bliss. He prays with them, embracing them for a long, long time.

“This is life to me,” he says later, heading home again through the Madrid night, “to see these boys open up to God, and maybe to meet them a few years later completely transformed and full of gratitude towards God, and even towards me, for helping out. Remar is a very tough place to be, but it is worth every minute of it.”

Javier Jiménez, Remar’s second-in-command, is Miguel Díez’s brother-in-law but a very different sort of person, reflective and soft-spoken. Twenty years ago, when the Díez and Jiménez families started caring for dropouts, he was 17 and the first to live under one roof with drug addicts.

“I lived for a year with three boys in a [trailer],” Jiménez recounts. “After a year they all left, just like that, and I

thought it had been my own thing and not God's, and I was ready to give it up. But on the next day a new boy came to move in with me, and from that point on the ministry started growing."

Today, at 38, Jiménez has 11 children—seven of his own and four adopted ones. Two of the adopted children were born with AIDS, and another adopted child was born blind.

With his family he served for seven years as a Remar "pioneer missionary" to Guatemala, and he would gladly leave on a new pioneer mission again if he could be spared at the headquarters. He readily admits that his extreme lifestyle often has been hard and still is.

The first years were very difficult for him, he says. "I was taking care of drug addicts older than myself. I had much zeal but little maturity. Every time a boy left I thought it was my fault."

Jiménez says that in recent years he has found it easy to minister. "But God's dealing with me gets tougher and tougher," he adds. "But as you see, I am still around."

After witnessing 20 years of continuous expansion in Remar, Jiménez has concerns that the ministry might not be able to "preserve its soul." Today there is less of an influx of clients into Remar centers in Spain than a few years ago because of new government programs.

"I believe God wants us to care for people with the same passion as in the beginning," he explains. "I lived with the boys, ate with them, stayed up all night during their cold

turkey, went out searching for the strays. With thousands coming, there is a risk that you start viewing people as a means to maintaining the structure.”

Jiménez says he foresees a “new phase for Remar” in which the staff starts “reaching out to normal people also.” But will the radical Remar message and lifestyle attract, for example, the prospering Spanish middle class?

“It is the Holy Spirit reaching people, not us,” Jiménez comments. “Still,” he adds in an afterthought, “my own burden is for social work.”

José Vicente Gilabert, 43, director of Remar in East Spain, who himself was hooked on heroin and ended up in a psychiatric hospital with suicidal depression, told Charisma that today’s clients come to Remar in worse physical condition than yesterday’s clients. One reason for this, he thinks, is that the “lesser cases” are now being cared for by the government.

“The drug scene has changed,” Gilabert says. “There is less heroin, maybe, and more cocaine and Ecstasy now. But our job has not changed. We care for the inner man.”

At its core, Remar’s mission is still the same: To reach people like Gilabert—and Santiago Álamo, who probably would be dead today if Remar had not helped him abandon his life as a showgirl and prostitute.

The 38-year-old former transvestite beamed when Charisma asked if he might marry a woman some day. Says Álamo: “Oh yes, I do wish to marry, and I believe I will.”

Tomas Dixon is Charisma's European correspondent. Based in Sweden, he traveled to Madrid, Spain, to file this report.