

Where Hustlers Find Hope

MALE PROSTITUTES in inner-city Chicago are finding a new kind of love from a radical ministry that offers compassion instead of judgment.

Jerome reads the street as if he is reading a best-selling novel. His lanky frame slouched around a cigarette butt, he casts his attention everywhere except on the man talking to him in the entryway of the darkened high-rise.

Jerome's indifference doesn't faze Larry Hope of Chicago's Emmaus Ministries. He is used to talking to men who seem not to listen.

"You're a smart guy, Jerome," Larry says, his words hanging heavily in the damp summer night. "I know you can read, not like a lot of the other guys out here. You could do so much if you were ready to get off the streets, get clean. We want to help you with that."

Jerome, a 24-year-old homeless male prostitute shrugs and flicks his cigarette toward the gutter. Unselfconsciously, he slides his thumb into his mouth to replace the cigarette and continues to look past Larry so he can size up the driver of a car that slows as it goes by. Apparently, it is just someone on his way to somewhere, not a potential trick.

Larry continues: "Look, I've known you for three years. You've been hustling, on the streets or in jail that whole time. You weren't meant to live like this. When are you gonna trust someone to help you?"

A police car rounds the corner, its driver slowing in the neon-tinged darkness to turn on the high-beam searchlight, shifting Larry, his quietly praying ministry partner and Jerome onto their feet and out of the entryway. Getting up seems to flip a switch inside Jerome. He talks about how he became a hustler: the abusive home, the gritty urban poverty and his first sexual experience-with a transvestite-that ended in his first arrest as a teen.

"I belong out here," he says, drug-glazed eyes meeting Larry's for the first time in the conversation.

Shaking his head, Larry holds his gaze. "No, you don't," he says softly.

Ambassador of Jesus Located in Chicago's slowly gentrifying but still raw uptown neighborhood, Emmaus Ministries () has been telling male prostitutes they don't belong out there for the last 15 years. John Green, Emmaus' founder and director, is a joyous and passionate ambassador of Jesus, whether he's talking with a guy who has fallen back into old, destructive patterns or speaking to a suburban congregation about what God is doing on the tough city streets. This is where he lives and ministers with wife Carolyn, their three children, and a committed team of staff and volunteers.

"I grew up in a good family in suburban Akron," Green says. "I was active in my local Catholic church throughout my life." He continues that involvement today, serving as a permanent ordained deacon in the Catholic Church.

At 16, Green had a life-changing encounter with the Holy Spirit that sparked a fire for Bible study, evangelism and

missions throughout the rest of his high school years. His best friend was headed to Wheaton College, and Green felt certain the evangelical suburban Chicago school was God's will for him as well.

While at Wheaton, Green felt God's irresistible call to minister to the urban poor. During his junior year, he left Wheaton to work with street kids as a part of New York's Covenant House ministries. He kept running into male prostitutes on the streets and discovered that no one was committed to working with these men.

"There were people working with female prostitutes, but it didn't seem like there was anyone reaching the male hustlers," he told Charisma.

After two life-changing years in New York, Green returned to Wheaton to finish his degree. One night each week he headed into Chicago to walk the streets of the city in prayer, seeking God and the broken men lying in plain sight on sidewalks and in alleys and gutters.

Among the friends he made there were hustlers. These weren't high-priced male escorts; they were men selling their bodies to other men so they could get enough money for their next drug fix and maybe a bed in a cheap hotel for the night.

Green had no easy answers for these men. But he knew that even if no one else wanted to touch them, Jesus did. And within months, he'd convinced a small group of students and professors from Wheaton to join him on a treasure hunt for lives that the rest of the world calls trash.

Fifteen years later, Emmaus Ministries continues this treasure hunt through “presence-based” evangelism, an unswerving commitment to walk with the men through the process of transformation and educate them about the “night community” that seeks to unite the local body of Christ with Emmaus in service and prayer.

The first contact most hustlers have with Emmaus occurs through the faithful and consistent efforts of those involved in the ministry’s outreach teams. These teams are staffed by people such as K.T. McClure, Emmaus’ dreadlock-coifed Educational Ministries director, who at age 23 is a veteran street minister.

“As a teen, I experienced some hard things and some rejection,” McClure says. “God translated these experiences into a heart for the poor.”

She headed to Minneapolis’ North Central University for college, majoring in urban ministries at the Assemblies of God school. But a big part of her education took place outside the classroom, through ministering to street people in the Twin Cities.

“I learned that I needed to both hear God’s voice and feel His heartbeat,” she notes.

During her senior year, McClure went to Emmaus to do an internship. The training was essential, she says, for doing effective street ministry. She and a male outreach partner hit the streets several nights a week in areas populated by gay men.

“The noise of the streets and the lies that surrounded the guys and came out of their mouths meant that I needed to be able to listen and respond to the Holy Spirit everywhere we went,” she says.

Emmaus outreach teams go where the hustlers hang out-near bars, in the parking lots of convenience stores and doughnut shops, and in parks frequented by men in search of anonymous sex for hire. The teams work to build relationships of trust and respect with the men by developing friendships and inviting them to come for a meal at Emmaus’ ministry center.

“We are on the streets almost every night,” McClure says. “Even throughout the cold, dark Chicago winters. John Green says that if the guys are out here-and they are-then we need to be out here, too.”

She smiles and continues. “So we are. A number of the guys have mentioned to us that they see our outreach teams from the windows of apartments and businesses. That consistent presence is key to our ministry.”

Last year, more than 130 guys accepted the invitation issued by the street teams to come by the drop-in ministry center, located in a former crack house. The guys come for a decent meal, a shower, clothing, toiletries, the use of the ministry center washer and dryer, and most of all, friendship.

Staff and volunteers, who come from a wide mix of churches across the city and suburbs, first meet the guys at their point of need. They provide practical services such as help navigating the maze of paperwork needed to get a state ID or Social Security card; literacy tutoring; referrals to drug and

alcohol rehab centers in the area; free clothing and toiletries; a hot meal; and friendship with no strings attached.

But this isn't a charity or social service agency meant to make the men's lives more comfortable. Emmaus is a doorway to life off the streets, and that means making the guests who stop by the ministry house uncomfortable.

The men are asked to set a small goal for themselves each time they visit: applying for a job, making a phone call to a family member they haven't spoken to in years, checking in to rehab. The staff is there to walk alongside them each step of the way, no matter how often they fail.

"It is what Jesus does with all of us," Green says.

Sill Davis, Emmaus' director of ministry and outreach, concurs. "Transformation comes as men encounter Him and are healed and changed," he says.

Davis, a Pentecostal social worker, runs a weekly group at the ministry center that focuses on helping the men work through their broken sexual identities.

"The majority of these guys don't identify themselves as homosexual," Davis says. "This is what these guys do to survive. They need money and don't want to rob people, so instead they sell their bodies. But what they believe about themselves is warped through layers and layers of pain and bondage."

Oppression-shattering prayer, accountability and listening are all part of Davis' healing ministry. "Many of these men believe they have nothing to offer. I show them that God can take the boldness that allows them to hop in the car with perfect strangers and use it to do other things.

"It is surprising to some how many of the men have had exposure to Christianity at some point in their lives," he continues. "It is our job to show these prodigals that God can penetrate their despair and addictions."

Bringing Prodigals Home

For several years, Emmaus Ministries ran a live-in residence that walked men through the process of transformation.

"There are a number of good places that help addicts get clean," Green says. "But those places aren't equipped to deal with the other issues that our guys have. After 9/11, our donations dropped off, and we couldn't afford to keep the residential home going. But we have been working toward reopening in a new location in the coming months."

His faith in God's transforming power is contagious. "We are committed to educating churches about the ministry that Emmaus does and inviting them to join us," Green says, noting that the ministry is funded solely by donations from congregations and individuals.

"We offer Immersion Nights, where we take small groups out on the streets with us to do ministry. A couple of our staffers have developed a presentation we bring to congregations called 'Stories From the Streets' that uses song and dramatic

monologue to tell the stories of some of the men.

"We also have space in our ministry house for our Kaio Community, a residential internship for young and not-so-young people to join the ministry for a year of service, prayer and relationship-building," Green explains. The Greek word kaio means "to set on fire," he says, and was used to describe the experience of the two men who walked with Jesus on the road to Emmaus.

Prayer is what keeps the hearts of the staff and volunteers burning in the darkness they encounter every day. "We couldn't do what we do without prayer," Green admits. "Our staff and volunteers gather for formal times of prayer every week."

"We are very honest with one another about our struggles," Davis says. "I have no problem dropping everything and getting another staffer or two to pray for me after dealing with a difficult ministry situation. I have an informal team of intercessors at my church and on my mailing list, and I rely on their partnership. Everything we do here has to be saturated with prayer."

The staff goes to too many funerals of guys who get cut or shot or die of AIDS-related complications. Others for whom they've poured out their lives disappear, end up in jail, or have a crisis in their lives and revert to old, familiar, destructive patterns. Prayer sustains the workers through the pain of all the loss and disappointment.

But Emmaus' staff regularly experiences the power of answered prayer, too. Jerome is a good example. The day after his encounter with Outreach Coordinator Larry Hope, he showed up at the ministry house ready to talk about maybe getting clean. The "maybe" is a first step out of the darkness that puts men

such as Jerome on the Emmaus road-the road to transformation.

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