

“Street Priest” in Vancouver, DTES

Colleagues,

Folks in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada’s jewel on the Pacific coast, all know what the initials DTES mean. It’s the “Downtown East Side,” the Skid Row of this marvelous creme-de-la-creme metropolis. Lutheran pastor Brian Heinrich is known as the “street priest” for the halt, the maimed, the losers, the rejects, in DTES. Alfred DePew from the VANCOUVER OBSERVER recently “found” Brian on the DTES streets and has now completed a three-part series on his discovery.

[Wikipedia tells us: The Vancouver Observer is an online newspaper that publishes Vancouvercentric news and features daily. It was founded in 2006 by Linda Solomon as an online platform where local Vancouverites engage each other and discuss the issues affecting them and their city.]

Brian has appeared earlier in these ThTh posts—six times by my count over the years. He alerted me to the VO coverage. I’ve learned that when Brian told Alfred of his seminary days at Seminex, Alfred told him that he himself was a student at Webster University here in St. Louis during the Sturm-und-Drang of Seminex days, and was cheering from the sidelines. His own reportage on the Seminex theme—and possibly Brian’s too—isn’t quite the way I remember it, but I’ve made no changes in the three-part text. Here it is.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

PART ONE

Heinrich and the Lutheran Urban Mission Society in Vancouver's DTES

Alfred DePew

Posted: July 31, 2010

Vancouver's Lutheran Urban Mission Society has its roots in St. Louis. That's where Pastor Brian Heinrich, one of LUMS' founders, went to seminary some 30 years ago. He was educated and inspired by a small group of progressive theologians who, having been censured by the Lutheran Missouri Synod, formed Concordia Seminary in Exile, or Seminex, in 1974.

"These were the bright young stars of the 60s and 70s," says Heinrich, "many of them educated in Europe and trained in the historical-critical method, which put Scripture into historical context."

And to understand the controversy, we must look precisely at that-its historical context: the Prussian Union of 1817, by which King Frederick William III merged the Lutheran and the Reformed (Calvinist) Church in Prussia.

"Many Lutherans didn't want to be forced to merge," Heinrich explains, "and so they fled to the New World, with the psychological mindset of 'we have the truth, and we have to protect it.'" A viewpoint which informed both sides during the Missouri Synod controversy at Concordia Seminary 157 years later.

After repeated reprimands and several failed efforts at reconciliation, 45 of the seminary's 50 faculty members and a majority of their students walked out in protest to form

Concordia Seminary in Exile.

"They left with the processional cross and the shirts on their backs," says Heinrich. By the time Heinrich attended Seminex, the seminary had established itself in a storefront on Grand Avenue and was operating under the auspices of the Jesuits of St. Louis University.

"A reversal of the Reformation," says Heinrich, chuckling. "Lutherans are like Jesuits," he explains. "We're the protestant equivalent. Grounded in deep learning, with a commitment to theology-and action. Because they had been exiled from the church body and had no parishes, [Seminex students] had to develop alternative ministry styles. And that's the direct link from there to here."

When Heinrich returned to Vancouver 15 years ago, he noticed that there were no Lutheran churches in the downtown city core. "It's not that the downtown eastside needed to be Christianized; it was that the church needed to be engaged." When he mentioned that to the church hierarchy, they all nodded, and, as Brian says, "that was about it."

"So I called a meeting with people in the community, and we founded LUMS as a separate not-for-profit organization-grass roots founded and supported. We were building out of nothing. I had to convert the churches: here was Lazarus at our doorstep, Christ clothed in the poor. I had to coax Lutherans who are internally focused into external, politically challenging situations. I went out to churches and took youth groups around the downtown eastside. It was intense and demanding."

At first, LUMS had no office. Everything was on Brian's cell phone. He worked part-time as a street priest for St. James Anglican Church Community Services until they ran out of funding. Next LUMS was invited to First United Church on Gore

and Hastings, where they stayed for eleven years. Then came 18 months at Christ Church Cathedral. And then last November, LUMS moved to its own space at 360 Jackson Avenue.

LUMS is run on individual donations, not church structure. "Financial support for churches is shrinking," says Heinrich. LUMS doesn't depend upon the church for its survival. "Individuals of conscience believe in our work, and this gives us broader support and keeps us truly independent."

The Labatt Beer Employee Association, a dating service for young adults, and schools all send volunteers to serve food to the poor at the LUMS sponsored soup kitchen once a month.

"It's the church as organic community vs. the church as facility," he says.

In Brian's theology, contemplation, scriptural study, and action are inseparable. His passion for social justice is fueled by ecumenical impulses. Heinrich has always had close ties to Catholics and Anglicans engaged in the downtown eastside: the Sisters of the Atonement, Father Ken Forester, and members of the Catholic Worker Movement. He preaches regularly at [the Anglican] Christ Church Cathedral.

"The Eucharist is the heart of what I do," says Heinrich. "Each Tuesday, when I walk to the Cathedral to celebrate mass, I pick up everyone's woundedness and carry it with me to the altar."

To learn more, visit LUMS' website: <http://www.lums.ca/>

PART TWO

In Canada's poorest neighborhood, a pastor serves

mass and lunch

Alfred DePew

Posted: Aug 3rd, 2010

The fourth Saturday of every month, the Lutheran Urban Mission Society serves a hot meal at 373 East Cordova Street. Before the gate opens, Pastor Brian Heinrich serves mass to the volunteers at St. Paul's next door.

Today, the volunteers are from a protestant youth group in Burnaby, 15-20 of them, mostly teenagers, and not quite sure what to make of it all. They are in unfamiliar territory-Canada's poorest neighborhood, a catholic church-and before them stands the imposing figure of a pastor well over six feet tall, sporting a Mohawk, and with both earlobes full of cobalt blue spiral earrings.

Brian invites them to come closer, into the front pews.

"I need your help," he says. "I'm not going to do all the work here. I want you to listen to the text. Then I'm going to ask you some questions."

A boy gets up to read from Jeremiah.

"For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, ... then I will dwell with you in this place,"

Then a girl comes forward to read from Matthew, the parable of the man who sowed good seed and his enemy who came and sowed weeds among the wheat.

"What do you hear God saying to us?" asks Heinrich. "Come on, you have to help me."

There's a long, awkward silence. Heinrich can't wait too long. There are people to feed.

"The stuff that we do in here in God's beautiful house," says Brian, "has everything to do with our everyday lives. If worship is separate from what's happening outside, as if our lives have no connection to this source-don't think God doesn't notice that. Many say the church ought not to concern itself with politics. But Jeremiah says, act justly with one another. Do right things in the world. If we make war or take advantage of others-is that connected to what we do here in church? I think not."

"And the parable of sowing seeds-what's that about?" he asks.

Again a silence, but this time one of the volunteers ventures an answer, and from that follows a bit of a conversation, though cautious.

"Does God want us to be fruitful?"

"Yes."

"Do we want to be wheat, or do we want to be weeds?"

"Wheat."

"Sometimes it's too easy to say 'we are wheat, and they are weeds.' The truth is we are each both. It'd be easy to pull up the weeds and burn them. That judgment is not ours. We're all mixed fields. The time we're in is full of opportunity. Seize the time and be fruitful. The parts of us can be whole and integrated as we live out in the world."

Heinrich concludes by acknowledging his listeners.

"This way of preaching may be different from how it's done in

your church," he says. "Thank you for being gracious."

Before serving communion, Brian says, "This is preparation for what we are about to do next door. Here we can practice generosity as we offer each other the body and blood of Christ."

Next door, we take our places. Everybody has been assigned a role: food server, plate carrier, table wiper, dish washer. They need someone to circulate with coffee, so that's what I'm assigned. I have two plastic pitchers, one for black coffee, the other for coffee with milk.

Brian opens the gate and lets in the first 43 people with free tickets in hand. It's a bit chaotic at first—who to serve what first? Some get coffee first. I pour coffee into cups for people who really want juice. Some don't speak English, so I lean over and let them look into the jug.

"Juice over here," I call out. We are angling around each other and there are some near misses.

Pasta with meat sauce. Pasta without meat sauce. Juice. Coffee. A bag of three cookies. Ice cream in back and a small bag of fruit to take home.

"Coffee!" I head over to a table. "Not black. With milk."

"Anyone for black coffee here?" I ask. "Yes? OK. I'll be right back with the coffee with milk."

"Where's the sugar?"

"Already on the table. Right there."

"Thanks."

"More juice over here," I call out and then head back to the counter to get the coffee with milk. But which table wanted it?

And someone over there hasn't been served a plate yet. Where's a food server? Never mind. Not my job. They can handle it.

Not everyone is finished when Brian lets in the second group. Some in the first group have shoveled pasta into plastic bags they brought and are calling for more.

The pace picks up with each new wave of people. I's hot. People are impatient. They're hungry. Also gracious, grateful, and obliging. The kids from Burnaby are steady, unflappable.

Each seating seems a little more chaotic than the one before, and yet we begin to meet the increased confusion with a kind of grace, a rhythm in our bodies, as we learn to work together as a team by instinct.

"Hey!" a man shouts. "Hey. She's had three meals! She's stealing."

When I go over to him, he grabs my arm and pulls me toward him.

"It's those Chinese," he says. "Rob you blind. Tell Brian to stop letting them in. It's not right. It's just not right."

"I'll tell him," I say, and pour him a cup of coffee.

When I'm near the door, I peer out to see if the crowd is thinning. All I see is more people.

Then suddenly there's no more pasta.

"We're not out! We're not out!" shouts one of the cooks. "There's more cooking!"

A grim irritation settles over the room.

"Welcome," I tell the newcomers. "Have a seat."

I keep pouring coffee.

Someone brings out the new pot of pasta, and the servers are at it again until, after eight seatings, we have fed more than 300 people.

As the crowd thins out and we start cleaning up, a woman approaches me. She's wearing a hoody and several bright scarves. She unwinds one of them, a fine, delicately coloured one made of something like silk, and presses it into my hand.

"Give this to Brian," she says.

I thank her and assure her I'll pass it on to him.

"Tell him it's from Luella. He doesn't know who I am."

"He will, Luella. Keep coming back," I say, "and he'll know you."

PART THREE

Posted: Aug 8, 2010

<http://www.vancouverobserver.com/blogs/betweenus/2010/08/08/called-serve-canadian-church-unconventional-pastor-brian-heinrich-engages>

Someone has written "Welcome" on the chalkboard just inside the front door of the Lutheran Urban Mission Society offices on Jackson Avenue. Pastor Brian Heinrich offers me a seat underneath a verse from Scripture, I John 3:17-18: "... if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth."

On another wall, I see a poster of Oscar Romero, the Archbishop of San Salvador, who was gunned down while celebrating mass the day after he had given a sermon in which he called upon "Salvadoran soldiers, as Christians, to obey God's higher order and to stop carrying out the government's repression and violations of basic human rights."

Brian puts the kettle on for tea and then goes in search of a guy who signed up for a yoga lesson with a teacher who is waiting in the chapel.

The walls are pale and fresh, the atmosphere bright and serene. In the chapel down the hall, I find icons of Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker Movement; Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.; South Africa's Steve Biko; and Kateri Tekakwitha, a Mohawk-Algonquian woman who converted to Christianity in the 1600s and was later canonized by the Catholic Church.

Brian comes back from the apartment building next door, having had trouble getting in to find the man he was looking for. "Security," he says. "It's not like they don't know me. They see me every day!" The man spaced out the lesson. Brian apologizes to the yoga teacher and asks him to come back at two, when he's sure the next person on the sign-up sheet will be here.

Once we are seated at the oak table in the chapel, Heinrich continues his story. After completing his studies at Seminex in St. Louis, he was called to a church in Oliver, BC, a German community not far from Penticton. He was 29. The elders approached him, clicked their heels, bowed slightly at the waist, and addressed him as "Herr Pastor." Brian was taken aback. He extended his hand and said, "Call me Brian." The elders were bewildered.

Heinrich would write out his sermons in English, have someone translate them into German, and then spend three days working on

his pronunciation. Though he'd been raised understanding German in his neighborhood in south Vancouver, he usually answered his grandparents in English.

"It was my first parish," says Heinrich. "When I graduated, I was a bit rigid, orthodox." He was first and foremost a theologian. "Oliver was a good match for me. They loved me and took care of me. They taught me to be more pastoral, more human. Later, when I was in New York, they sent me boxes of Okanogan jams and home-knit socks. Many of them are still in touch 25 years later."

From Oliver, BC, Brian was called to Manhattan, St. Luke's Church near Times Square on 46th Street. "Everything in New York shocked me," he says. "I was a book learning person up to that point pretty much." Once there, he ran a soup kitchen and a homeless shelter at the height of the HIV crisis. "Men were dying every week," says Heinrich. "They were like lepers. Everyone was afraid. We served meals with real utensils, nothing disposable. We were affirming their humanity, not just feeding them."

Brian's ministry grew to include hospice work. By the end of his time in New York, he served as the chaplain at Bailey House on Christopher Street.

"AIDS continues to be with me through my ministry-at Dr. Peter and St. Paul's Hospital. I'm often called to be with people in the last moments of their lives, praying and singing with them, holding them as they die. It's an honour. It shapes me."

As compelling as his work was in New York, Heinrich had always believed that he was called to serve the Canadian church. And yet when the first call came from a bishop asking him to come to White Horse, Brian declined. "I thought and prayed and said 'no.'" Six weeks later, the bishop called, asking him to

reconsider, and this time the answer was yes.

It was time to come home to Canada.

After a year or so in White Horse, he returned to Vancouver and settled in Strathcona. While working at a L'Arche community for the disabled, Heinrich started to become engaged in the downtown eastside, which eventually led him to form LUMS.

"The people I've worked with have changed me," says Brian. "That was Monsenor Romero's experience too-he was converted by the poor in El Salvador."

When Heinrich was asked to preach one Sunday at Christ Church Cathedral, he chose usury as his subject. He was pretty sure he wouldn't be asked back. But he was-and precisely because of that first sermon.

Brian's preaching style is unconventional, more of a conversation than a sermon. He maintains that it's not just his job to interpret biblical stories. "I speak freely," he says. "It's a dialogue. I'm not so much a preacher as the conductor of an orchestra-a living thing-the spirit is there. This is a living community, struggling with the text."

His style shows the influence of liberation theology and his experience preaching on Manhattan's Lower East Side in a storefront mission. A number of his parishioners were Afro-American and spoke up automatically during the sermon. "It was affirming, joyful," says Heinrich. "You knew they were there." And at some point, Brian began to answer them from the pulpit, "discerning the Word together," as he puts it. "I'm still responsible for proclaiming the Word, and I let spirit move as well."

In February of 2008, the house that he shared with his partner,

Nathan, burned down while they were on holiday in Mexico. "The fire has been very difficult," says Brian. "The house was my place of refuge, its garden an immediate experience of life and breath. It was also a place of hospitality and welcome, with a chapel where I'd serve weekly Eucharist. Being in exile has connected me even more to the people in the downtown eastside. Your whole world is turned upside down. Where to sleep and do laundry? I have that much more understanding and empathy for challenges of the homeless."

From time to time Heinrich returns to preach in the church he grew up in, Martin Luther Evangelical Lutheran Church at 46th and Fraser. It can be challenging. "The old German people tell me 'we had nothing when we got here. We worked hard and pulled ourselves up. Why don't those people just work hard and pull themselves up?' It's always dicey."

Heinrich explains that the circumstances of life have so wounded the homeless, they don't have the same choices.

"I don't think the old people get it," says Heinrich, "but they've come several times to put on the meal. And they see some of the same people and get to know their names and establish relationship-that's the conversion."

Over the past 15 years, a community has grown up around Brian Heinrich and his ministry. The Lutheran Urban Mission Society remains vibrant, even as the church is in recession.

"That's the work of a mission," says Heinrich, "to be self-sustaining. The One we worship is incarnate in the poorest place in Canada. It's a gift that the poorest are here to prove what this city can be."