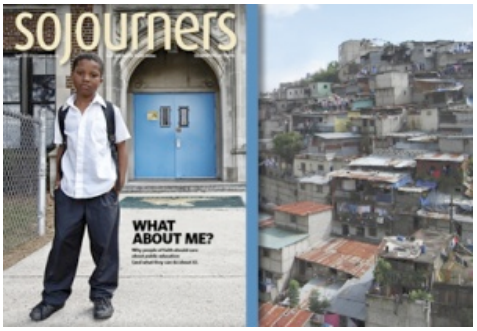
Mission: Transformed

by Michelle Garcia | September-October 2012

The Street Psalms community pursues theology from below—and that changes everything about how "missionary" work is done.

ON A FLIGHT from New York City to Guatemala some years back, I met a woman from Oklahoma on her way to visit her soon-to-be internationally adopted daughter. "I just found them, the Guatemalan children, on the internet and thought they were so beautiful," she said. She beamed, her blue eyes, carefully painted lips, and cross earrings all sparkling.



Guatemala's landscape, where wistful clouds cruise above fertile fields and past rumbling volcanoes, reflects the volatility of the country's tragic history. That history includes a decades-long civil war, ending in 1996, in which more than 200,000 people were killed, mainly by U.S.-backed government forces. To visit the country is to experience not just that history, but also a culture that pioneered astronomy, devised an intricate written language, and erected engineering miracles. But, asked whether she intended to preserve her adoptive daughter's ties to her homeland, the woman I met on the plane said, "If she wants to see it, we'll bring her. But really, there's nothing there."

The attitude that "there's nothing there" is, all too frequently, the attitude of missionaries en route to Guatemala. But when Joel Van Dyke arrived in 2003 from Philadelphia, he suspected there was plenty there—there in the country's slums and in the cities' bursting garbage dumps, where thousands of people find sustenance every day. He set out to find what was there by learning to ask the right questions of gang members, slum dwellers, sex workers, and the local faith leaders who work with them. To do this, he told *Sojourners*, he had to adopt the attitude "let's go see what God is doing in the world and let *that* color and shape the theological discourse."

That guiding principle is behind all of the work of the organization Van Dyke works for: the Center for Transforming Mission (CTM), an international nonprofit that provides theological training, spiritual formation, and networking support for local religious leaders in the global South. Based in Tacoma, Wash., and founded by longtime urban ministry worker Kris Rocke, CTM offers resources to grassroots organizations in more than a

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dozen countries.

In nine of them—Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Kenya, Romania, and the U.S.—local leaders working among "those who have been wrongly labeled the least, last, and lost," as Rocke puts it, together form a "ragtag religious order" they call "Street Psalms: A Community of the Incarnation." Street Psalms begins with a three-year theological training made up of six units, or "intensives," which, along with spiritual formation, forges a team. "The way we sustain poor people without silver or gold," says Rocke, "is through community." It's one committed, as the organization's website says, to "a shared life of action, reflection, and discernment." Members learn from each other by meeting, reading scripture together, and visiting each other's work sites.

STREET PSALMS' theology and community are born from the experiences of local leaders whose journeys have led them to find "good news." For Guatemalan-born Tita Evertsz, the journey began one night years ago on a bus from San Diego to Tijuana as she fled her abusive husband with $28 in her pocket, two young children, and another on the way. At the crossing into Mexico, an immigration officer asked for her entry visa; Evertsz, who had no papers to show, dug into her purse and prayed. When she looked up, he had left. She embraced her kids and wept. That's when a stranger did the unthinkable: She asked what was wrong and how she could help. The lady helped Evertsz find a motel, and soon she reconnected with her family, who arranged for her to continue home to Guatemala.

"I was wounded and hurt and confused. I had something inside pushing me to find God," Evertsz recalls. She began volunteering at a hospital in Guatemala City, where the nurses asked her to pray for a gang member in intensive care. Through him, she says, she discovered La Limonada, a sprawling slum where she began working with children, doing ministerial work and providing psychological guidance. Eventually she established two schools and a shelter for formerly abused and abandoned children. "The world sees [La Limonada's residents] as monsters, but [when you go] there you see human beings," she says, adding that their pain reflects the failings of those who judge them. "Because of lack of love, we fail to save them as children, which is why they arrive at where they do."

The road simply unfolded, she says—a path it seemed this solidly middle-class woman, now in her 50s, was destined to walk alone. "The perspective inside the church" was that "they don't believe there is hope" for residents of La Limonada, she says. "People don't want to go there." Five years ago, after some 13 years in La Limonada, she found Joel, and through him a community of some 30 people doing similar work: "Guatemalans fighting to create a better Guatemala," she calls them, people who "spoke my language." She was no longer alone.

Finding "good news in difficult places" and in the leaders who work there, says Van Dyke, is a journey illuminated by a scripture passage he holds dear: the story of Hagar in Genesis 16. As the Egyptian slave is running away, an angel calls her by name and asks, "Where have you come from and where are you going?" "Churches don't take the time to do what the angel did in the Hagar story," says Van Dyke. "He asks her this beautiful question of grace—'tell me your story.'"

A "THEOLOGY FROM below," he says, demands the recognition that "it's Hagar that understands far more than the Abrahams and Sarahs." After all, it's Hagar who is visited by an angel in this passage. The gang member that Tita Evertsz prayed for years ago in intensive care—who himself later became a pastor—was her Hagar, and Tita became Joel's, each revealing a message and sharing wisdom.

But embracing the principle behind Hagar means ceding the power and privilege missionaries often enjoy. Van Dyke and Rocke have often found themselves confronting the "toxic" method of evangelizing learned by many evangelists —"the paternalistic kind of evangelicalism that taught [many] to go into their communities and hit people over the head with the Bible," as Van Dyke describes it. "It's just another way of doing violence in the midst of all kinds of violence, this time in the name of Jesus."

It is a practice so ingrained that when Edwin Luna, a former gang member and drug user turned pastor, was preparing to launch his own ministry in Guatemala City, he originally based it on the "traditional" thinking that the "church is a building and you go out and bring people" into it. Then two gang members showed up at his home. His first instinct was to offer them prayer. They prayed until a voice deep inside Luna whispered they didn't come to pray; they came to ask for a favor. "When I asked, 'what [do] you want?' they said, 'we want to live with you,'" he remembers. Against his better judgment, defying all rules of sanity and safety, he welcomed them in. With that, eight years ago, began his mission with gang members.

Luna established the Iglesia Tesoros de Gracia (Church of Treasures of Grace)—but he found his traditional theology study offered little inspiration on the streets. "I was taught how to baptize someone," he says. "But they didn't show

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study offered little inspiration on the streets. "I was taught how to baptize someone," he says. "But they didn't show me how to win the person with a vision of the streets." Through participating in CTM's Street Psalms program and community, Luna formed a theology that leans toward texts such as the story of Hagar or the horrific story of rape and dismemberment contained in Judges 19, studied for the pain they express and the message of hope they contain.

"The church doesn't go to those stories because they don't know what to do with them," says Van Dyke. But Street Psalms participants "go to scripture together to give voice to pain," which is "life-producing. It's a whole new way to read scripture—learning to take the stained glass off the text."

CTM HAS, IN ways big and small, challenged traditional missionary practice. In the summer, the organization hosts North Americans on two-week visits to communities in the global South—but it pointedly names these groups, some 15 a year, "vision trips," not short-term "missions." As Van Dyke wrote in CTM's weekly "Word from Below" email last year, in "contrast to a 'mission trip' (centered on what an outsider is invited to come and 'do' in another culture), a vision trip focuses on the invitation for an outsider to come and 'see' what God is doing through local, grassroots leaders serving their own people in hard places."

The effects of CTM's approach have bubbled back home, including to Christian Reformed World Missions (CRWM), the 124-year-old missions agency that, along with CTM, helps funds Van Dyke's work in Guatemala. CRWM director Gary Bekker says Van Dyke has "pushed [the organization] to whole new areas." While service to the "least, last, and lost" is hardly new, says Bekker, Van Dyke's "concentration and vigor" stand out. "He's taken it—not that it's extreme—pretty deep," says Bekker, praising Van Dyke's "constant addressing and pushing on the fact that, even in prison, the gospel is for a whole person and for all dimensions of life."

Van Dyke and Rocke's theology and critiques, however, have come at a cost. Recently, they authored *Geography of Grace,* a book inspired by "a holy discontent" with a mainstream-church "gospel that can unwittingly sow seeds of violence and despair among society's most vulnerable members." Their first publisher withdrew; according to Rocke, this was largely because of the book's interpretation of the scene in Matthew 4 where the devil tempts Christ atop the pinnacle of the temple. In this passage, Rocke and Van Dyke find a Jesus who is invited, but refuses, to violently enter a violent church system, one promoting sacrifice over mercy.

"Our proclamation of the gospel is often a product of the power and privilege we enjoy," Van Dyke and Rocke write in the book. (As it has been in the past; for example, the CRWM, when founded in 1888 to work with Indigenous Peoples in the U.S., was initially called the "Board of Heathen Missions.") The story of mission—his own and others'—is, Rocke says, to start with the attitude, "'here comes the white great savior,' only to figure out that [the missionary] is the wounded one, is the crippled one."

Van Dyke and Rocke introduce and conclude their book by emphasizing that their work is firmly based on a willingness to give up the power of unquestioned certainty. They submit themselves, they say, to the very real possibility that they are wrong. For now, though, in Guatemala and countries across three continents, they and others at the Center for Transforming Mission have committed themselves to the simple act of asking.

Michelle García *(mg@michellegarciainc.com), a journalist based in New York City and Mexico City, is the director of the documentary* Against Mexico: The Making of Heroes and Enemies.

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Meg Webber

Not all internationally adoptive parents have this perspective. Many of us become purposefully multicultural families who offer a balanced pride with a measure of critical analysis toward both our current nation and the one of our child's birth.

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Stephen Osborn · 57 years old

I appreciate the push back of the two previous comments. People who read SoJo are probably on the leading edge of the curve in terms of sensitive awareness. Reference to a full book in a short article succinctness, w often sound stereotypical. But what I appreciated about the book " Geography of Grace" took more time to digest, and challenged the well intention ed but hurtful actions we do in the name of Jesus. Obviously, for instance, Joel doesn't mean that someone actually physically hits people with a bible. But when we approach the marginalized with a message that is undergirded by a sense of privilege based on being right with God, and therefore blessed in all the ways the marginalized are not, we hurt the listeners. The violence that Joel and Chris speak of is often even in the omission of a sense of story for t...See More

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Peggy Niles Kwoka · Dallas, Texas

I think the article was a bit sterotypical in its descriptions, both for adoptive parents and missionaries. I have been blessed by going on a mission in Honduras in which we worked at a squatter's village. Our primry focus was on building relationships. We shared our faith together. Together, we helped improve their situation a little based on what they thought they needed. I don't think we are the only mission group that approaches international mission in this way.

I liked the comment about sustaining the poor through community. Loves and fishes anyone?

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3333 14th Street NW, Suite 200 | Washington, DC 20010 | Phone 202.328.8842 | Fax 202.328.8757 | sojourners@sojo.net