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The Oregonian

SOCIETAL CHALLENGES

Sunday, March 23, 2008

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The Oregonian

It was a scene that defied many a preconceived notion. Some 500 Christian pastors were crowded into the sanctuary at Cedar Mill Bible Church in Northwest Portland to rally around evangelist Luis Palau's Season of Service, which is aiming to unite 15,000 locals -- the churched and unchurched -- in a local campaign to tackle homelessness and other social ills.

Given the evangelical creed of the host church and most of those assembled, this alone was enough to trip up secularists' usual story lines about evangelicals. Aren't they the ones who care only about "values" issues like resisting gay rights? But there was more.

City Hall duties fell to Commissioner Sam Adams -- a civic leader whose gay orientation would seem to make him a most unlikely attendee at this roundup of evangelical church leaders. But there was Adams taking his turn at the pulpit, flanked by Palau and other ministers, reading the city's proclamation of support, to loud applause.

It is too soon to declare the beginning of the end to the culture wars. But as we survey the landscape on this Easter Sunday, hopeful signs abound. Perhaps in recognition of the damaging futility of a "war" paradigm, maybe because people on both sides of the culture divide are growing tired of fighting, more and more would-be warriors seem to be venturing out of their trenches and braving the common ground.

Instead of emphasizing lingering differences between opposing camps, these culture peacemakers are finding common cause on urgent issues that transcend most of our differences. Homelessness and poverty, AIDS, degradation of the environment, genocide -- who's going to argue with addressing those?

Palau's ministry is evolving in interesting ways. The Portland-based evangelist has made mass crusades and festivals his stock in trade. Although he is hardly changing his beliefs and salvation message, he is definitely moving toward a new model. The essence: Don't just convert people to Christianity or bolster the already-believers, but also marshal their energy to serve the community on a sustained basis.

Kevin Palau, the famed minister's son who is vice president of the Luis Palau Association, emphasizes that the shift is not principally about changing Christianity's image. But he's glad if that's one result.

Ask a random sample of Portlanders about Christians, the younger Palau says, and it's doubtful that many will offer, "Oh, they're the ones out serving the community with no strings attached." He is right, and it's a truth that hurts for a good number of Christians these days. "What we're saying now," Palau adds, "is wouldn't it be

amazing to partner with the city and corporate leaders to make the community better?"

Can nonevangelicals cooperate with the ardent Christian contingent? Evidently yes, if we can judge from the willingness of city leaders like Adams and his homelessness-fighting City Council colleague Erik Sten to join forces with area evangelical leaders for the Season of Service.

Recent developments on the campus where I work furnish still more evidence of a possibility for dialogue between culture camps. The Princeton Review college guide ranks Lewis & Clark College the most secular campus in America. So what would happen when Christian filmmaker Dan Merchant brought his forthcoming documentary "Lord, Save Us From Your Followers" to Palatine Hill for a special prescreening and discussion with Lewis & Clark students?

Even though students had some idea that it was a Christian-themed movie with a Gospel message, event organizers' worries about a low turnout turned out to be misplaced -- very misplaced. About 300 students packed the auditorium, and spilled into the aisles and entryways, to watch Merchant's film and enter a highly empathetic discussion with him afterward. Of course, this was no ordinary "Christian" movie.

"Lord Save Us," slated for national release in June, is a disarming and uplifting call for a truce in the culture wars. In his remarks to the students, as in his film and the companion book, Merchant points out that many believers have lost track of the simple but crucial biblical imperative to spread love and compassion. (Forgive any bias I may have toward Merchant's film and book; he and I have become friends in the course of his interviewing me for them.)

The early February screening seems to have started something. About 130 students -- most of them not religious in any traditional sense -- filled out comment cards with mostly positive sentiments, many expressing a desire to get involved in that compassion thing themselves. What quickly emerged were plans for a college contingent to participate in Night Strike, a Christian service program that provides food, clothes and friendship to homeless people under the Burnside Bridge every Friday night.

We could go on with the hopeful examples from this area and around the country: Luis Palau's dialogue about belief and nonbelief with an atheist Chinese government official, captured in a new book; more evangelicals venturing beyond the narrow band of Christian Right issues; declarations by the likes of progressive evangelical leader Jim Wallis that morality is not the exclusive province of religious believers; the wild popularity of Barack Obama's message of hope and unity; and an olive branch from a worldwide coalition of 138 Muslim leaders to the Christian world.

About that Muslim olive branch: Christian leaders in this country split over the issue of accepting it and offering their own in return. Hundreds signed a statement, published in The New York Times in November, that welcomed the hand of friendship and acknowledged the two faiths' commonalities. But a cadre of leading conservative interests, including Focus on the Family, rejected the entreaty with a declaration that it "marginalized" Jesus and wrongly honored the "false" God of Islam.

Don't get the idea that the standard-bearers of the Christian right are all ready to soften their stand against gay rights. David Crowe, head of the Lake Oswego-based Restore America, recently told The Oregonian's Nancy Haught, "If they're saying forget about Leviticus and what Romans 1 say about homosexuality, there is never going to be common ground." Crowe, unfortunately, still has plenty of company.

Will the "dividers" continue to have the final word? Let's hope not. For now, those of us tired of the polarized shouting match can at least take comfort in knowing there's finally a little competition for the microphone.

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former reporter, he writes regularly on religion in public life for USA Today and other publications.

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