

STREETWALKING



A Chicago ministry helps prodigal sons get off the streets and come back home.

Bob Smietana

A four-car garage stands behind the brick six-flat in Chicago's Uptown neighborhood that houses Emmaus Ministries. On the back wall of the garage is a fourteen-by-sixty-foot mural, depicting a modern version of the story of the prodigal son. In the center of the mural, a father wearing a carpenter's belt welcomes a young man in tattered clothes. The young man has a broken arm and only one shoe.

Behind the two men are the words, "Welcome home, my son."

Welcoming home the prodigal son describes the work of Emmaus. Founded by John Green in 1990, Emmaus volunteers and staff reach out to hustlers, young men involved in male prostitution on the streets. While no one knows the exact number of hustlers, Chicago police arrested more than 2,600 men for prostitution in 1998.

in Emmaus



Many come from broken homes, or were abused as children. Green tells the story about Joseph, who he met at the drop-in center at Emmaus.

“Every Wednesday night we have a family dinner for the guys in the ministry center. One night, while my wife, Carolyn, was setting up the table, Joseph comes in. He’d only been coming by for a couple of days, so I didn’t quite know his whole story. He sat on the couch with me as guys were milling around and getting set up. Then he leaned over to me and said, ‘You know John, I have never done this before.’”

Green wasn’t sure what Joseph was talking about. He was concerned that Joseph thought he was a potential trick, or sexual customer. Green asked Joseph what he meant.

“He was really embarrassed,” Green says, “and he said, ‘Well, this family dinner thing. I have never done this before, but I have seen it on TV.’ Then it dawned on me. This was a twenty-eight-year-old man who had never sat down at a family dinner table, and he was nervous. He didn’t know how to react and he didn’t know what to do. And then



Alfred Coleman, ministry coordinator

we starting hearing his story, how he had been abused since he was four months old and had been taken out of the fam-

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ily home. From there, he moved from group home to group home, then to the juvenile detention center, the penitentiary and out on to the street. In the course of that life he never had a family dinner. That just took my breath away. That’s what we are trying to provide

here—that kind of surrogate home for guys who never had one.”

Green, originally from Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio, came to the Chicago area in 1983 as a student at Wheaton College. He dropped out in 1986, and went to New York City, where he worked with runaway kids and street ministry with Covenant House. He returned to Wheaton in 1989, and started doing outreach in the Uptown neighborhood. He talked several of his classmates and professors into joining him, eventually building a core group of eight volunteers. In the fall of 1990, that group officially organized Emmaus Ministries.

The group had three goals when they

started, says Green. They wanted to start an outreach program, a drop-in center, and a residential program.

Bob Smietana is associate editor of The Covenant Companion. For more information about Emmaus Ministries, log on to their website at www.streets.org.



Emmaus Ministry mural depicts the prodigal son coming home.

A Welcoming Face

The first person that you meet as you enter the ministry center at Emmaus is Lisa Martin, the greeter. Martin, thirty-eight, has been working at Emmaus since November 1999. She welcomes people, hands out towels, makes sure that they do chores, and tries to get to know each of the guys.

"A lot of what I do is building relationships," says Martin. "Most of what they have done, I have done or worse—and the Lord has seen me through that and I don't freak out on them."

Martin knows first-hand the difficulty that many of the men she works with have in getting off the streets. She has been through drug rehab, lived in a shelter, and when she was younger, worked as a prostitute for several months.

"Prostitution is a hard thing to get out of," Martin says, "because on the one hand it makes you feel really used and dirty and really scum of the earth. But on another level, it builds you up because you have manipulated these men into doing things and [you feel] that you have some control. I think that especially as many of these guys were abused as children, it is a way to try and get control back because you were never in control as a child."

Eventually, Martin says that she straightened out her life. She found a job as a day-care worker and then doing social work. She also fell in love and settled down. But her life fell apart again when that relationship failed. She eventually lost her home, her job, and even, she says, her mental health. Martin was living at a shelter run by Jesus People USA Covenant Church when she heard about the job at Emmaus. She says that the healing she has received in her own life helps her look at the men in the ministry center differently.

"Sometimes I think that there's no way I could have loved these guys twenty years ago," says Martin. "I would have thought that they were sick or the scum of the earth. Now I know I am no better than they are. I am only doing better now because of the Lord. That God could take me when I was so broken and build me up enough to do something good for him is just amazing." □



Emmaus staff members Christa Clumpner and Larry Hope (left) talk with hustlers.

"I thought that we could rather easily do those three things in a matter of months," says Green, laughing. "Nine years later, we have finally fulfilled that initial vision."

The outreach program started first, followed by the start of the drop-in center, also known as the ministry center in 1993. In 1996, the Greens bought a six-flat building at 921 W. Wilson Avenue, and Emmaus moved to that new location. The offices occupy a first floor apartment. The basement was renovated to include a full kitchen and three bathrooms for the drop-in center. In 1999, Emmaus started a residential program in one of the other apartments. The Greens live in the building, and also rent space to a college urban-internship program.

Every night, at least one team of Emmaus volunteers is out on the streets from 8 p.m. to 2 a.m. Each team is made up of one man and one woman. Clad in hats and black shirts with the Emmaus logo, they hang out in the gay bars, parking lots, and streets where male prostitution is prevalent.

They spend most of their time just talking to people. They listen and try to build relationships. They also hand out Emmaus business cards, and invite the

men they meet to stop by the ministry center.

Getting people to stop by the center takes time, says Alfred Coleman, ministry coordinator. "One of the guys has been involved with the ministry center for a year and a half," says Coleman, "but

his first contact with us was seven years ago. It took him six years to get here."

Coleman, thirty-six, started out as a volunteer outreach minister after meeting Green in 1992. He joined the staff in September 1996. Before he met Green, he was the director of a soup kitchen, homeless shelter, and feeding program. "I felt like God was calling me to do a little more front-line min-

istry," he says.

The ministry center is open five days a week from noon to 2 p.m., and on Saturdays from 4 to 8 p.m. It is also open from 2 to 8 p.m. on Wednesdays. Much of the time is spent on practical concerns. Guests can eat a meal, do laundry, take a shower, work on their resumés, or look for a job. They can also use the Emmaus address to get their mail—a key concern as many of the men don't have a permanent place to live.

"Each day when a guy comes in they have to have a goal," says Coleman, "whether it is making phone calls, work-

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ing on a resumé, or preparing for a job interview. We do a lot of general things—feeding, clothing, job support, but our main thrust is realizing that they are all individuals and need a certain amount of support and care. We also set up sponsorships, where a guy who is serious about changing his life meets with [a sponsor] once a week. The [guest] is accountable to the sponsor and the sponsor supports them by praying for them or by encouraging them.”

Coleman says that the number of men who drop by can vary from as few as three to as many as twenty-five. The numbers jump dramatically in the summer, as many of the guys work in places like New Orleans in the winter, and move north to Chicago for the summer.

Aaron, one of the guests in the ministry center, had been working as a prostitute on Hubbard Street when he met one of the Emmaus outreach teams. Wearing a University of Colorado sweat-shirt and a baseball cap, he says that he turned to prostitution after getting out of prison, where he served a ten-year term for dealing drugs.



John and Carolyn Green

“I promised God I would not go back to selling drugs,” says Aaron. “Nothing is worse than making a vow to God and breaking it.”

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He says that he is having a hard time keeping that promise. “It’s so hard to be out on the street,” he says, “wondering whether I am going to eat or sleep, and knowing that I could call my old friends and go back to dealing drugs. I am not going back to that life.”

Because many employers won’t hire convicted felons, Aaron has had a hard

time finding a job. He says he lost his last job when his employer discovered that he lied about his conviction record.

As one of the other men passes by, Aaron jumps up and yells, “Seven o’clock, remember, the guy told me to be here at seven, across the street at the circus.” Just down the street from Emmaus are several trucks carrying carnival equipment. The carnival will be hiring laborers for a couple of days’ work.

Aaron holds up a photo taken at the Easter dinner Emmaus hosted. He is in the bottom right of the photo, next to

John and a group of about twelve. “This is real nice,” he says. He looks at me and says, “This is the only picture I have.” A few weeks later, Green says that Aaron has dropped out of sight. A woman has been calling the center, telling the staff that Aaron disappeared with her car.

Many of the men that Emmaus works with have multiple obstacles to over-

Covenant Connections

Emmaus Ministries has a strong Covenant connection on several levels. Two board members are members of Covenant churches: Gene Frost, chairperson (Faith Covenant, Wheaton, Illinois); and Guy Hockerman (Grace Covenant, Chicago, Illinois). Emmaus has also received funding from Covenant Ministries of Benevolence.

Hockerman and his wife, Sue, first got to know John Green while they were students at Wheaton College. His first exposure to Emmaus was during an immersion night, where visitors to Emmaus get a first-hand view of the ministry by walking the streets with an outreach team.

“It was really eye-opening,” Hockerman says. “We went into some of the places where hustling happens. It’s really the only way to see what Emmaus does. They are getting known in the community—they aren’t always evangelizing. The idea is that these guys are a long way from saying that they need help.”

Hockerman, a financial planner for

Harris Bank in Chicago, says that he got involved with Emmaus to help out with fund-raising. Because of the intense support that the men involved need, Emmaus is an expensive ministry.

“Just because it costs a lot doesn’t mean we should not do it,” he says. “We as Christians need to be in all of the dark places, and Emmaus works in some really dark places, where there isn’t a lot of light or hope.”

Lianne Blons, a graduate of North Park Seminary and Covenant minister, first learned about Emmaus through Carolyn Green, when they worked together at Covenant Bookstore. She did some volunteer work, and wanted to be able to support the ministry financially. She also had a life-long goal to run a marathon, a goal that seemed out of reach after she had serious complications from foot surgery several years ago.

When she recovered and started thinking about running a marathon, a friend asked her, “Why don’t you do it for



Lianne Blons

a purpose?”

So this month, she is running in the Grandma’s Marathon in Minnesota as a fund-raiser for Emmaus.

“I really believe in Emmaus’s mission and the way that they are fulfilling it,” Blons says. “They are going out to a population that is uncomfortable for most of us Christians, reaching out with God’s love and the grace of God. They go full circle with the guys, and walk with them through the process of redemption.” □

Emmaus's Ecumenical Mission

One of the things that makes Emmaus unique, besides the focus of its ministry, is a commitment to helping Catholics and evangelicals work together.

John Green says that his interest in getting Catholics and evangelicals working together grew out of his experience at Wheaton College, where he was one of a handful of Catholic students. It also is a part of his marriage—his wife Carolyn is a Baptist and the daughter of a minister.

"I walked away from my Wheaton experience with the sense that evangelicals don't have a clue what Catholics are like," says Green. "I [also] realized that Catholics have incredible misconceptions about evangelicals. We have to get Catholics and Protestants talking to each other—we are both interested in bringing people to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Why can't we do that together?"

Getting evangelicals and Catholics to work together is not easy. In fact, Green says that Emmaus would probably get more financial support if they became either a Catholic organization or an evangelical organization.

Still he sees an opportunity to unite people on a grass-roots level, by getting them to focus on reaching men involved in prostitution.

"I often use a great quote from John Wesley, 'Some people want to live within the sound of chapel bells, but I want to run a mission a yard from the gates of hell.' And that's exactly what Emmaus is. These guys are going to hell—they are losing their lives and their souls. Emmaus sits on that borderline before guys fall in and helps them come to their senses. And that is the Christian call, whether you are Orthodox, Catholic, or Protestant."

come. Some have criminal records and many have drug addictions. Many have no family to turn to, or may have even been put out on the streets to earn money for their family.

"About 75 percent of the guys are heterosexual in their orientation," says Green, "but are engaging in homosexual activity. So to go out and perform they start doing a few shots, smoking

short term assistance, giving people a place to stay while they await a long-term placement in a drug treatment center or other program.

"There's a lot of restoration that has to go on in the lives of these guys," says Green. "We really struggle with seeing guys make a few steps ahead and then take a step back. They make a few more steps ahead and a few steps back—it's

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some dope, or snort some coke. That begins to create an addiction and to feed that addiction they have to prostitute more and to prostitute more they use more."

Green says that the cycle of addiction and prostitution can go on for five to six years, until, like the prodigal son, "they come to their senses."

"When you are in a relationship with a person," says Green, "and through the grace of God, you help a prodigal son come to his senses—that is a powerful place to be. To me, that is such an awesome privilege to be used by God in that way. Sometimes that happens right out on the streets, while you are just talking to a guy and he is hustling, and then he starts sharing, 'I am just so sick and tired of being sick and tired.'"

Helping someone get off the streets takes a great deal of time and energy. Emmaus's residential program provides

definitely a cycle of change and growth that people go through."

But there are successes. A number of guys have made it off the streets and into new lives. One of them, named Leslie, recently stopped in to see John with his five-year-old son.

"Leslie was baptized at Uptown Baptist Church a couple of weeks ago and it has been so exciting to see the growth in him, but it has been in fits and starts. Six years ago, he was a hard-core male prostitute and crack cocaine addict. He has had a couple relapses in the last couple of years but he has held it together. What is a success about this is that it has not just changed his life—this has now changed generations. If he stays on the right path, he is not going to abuse his son like his father abused him. That cycle of abuse has stopped in this life and to me that is exciting, because we are literally changing generations." □

