

On the Front Lines

Love in action—an amazing story of a journalist's experiences in the world's most dangerous and hopeless situations—a story interwoven with memories of Christians who were there first.

by Brian Stewart

Brian Stewart delivered the text of this message to the 160th Convocation of Knox College, Wednesday May 12, 2004.

Thank you very much for your most kind introduction. It is a touching moment to stand before this 160th Anniversary Convocation at Knox College. It's rather intimidating to appear in this august body that has produced so many formidable public speakers, but I'm very honoured to be here—nostalgic too. For I also celebrate an anniversary. Exactly 40 years ago this morning I wrote my last ever exam just before graduating from Ryerson, in 1964. I can even give the precise time—I recorded in my diary that I put down pen at 11:41 a.m. Not that I was anxious to get away, of course! No, I like Ryerson, but that's how "chomping-at-the-bit" I was to start my career and to confront the challenges ahead, as you graduates must be tonight.

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Now mind you 40 years ago we young journalists were pretty cocky (imagine that!). We thought ourselves good at sousing out how the future would unfold. For instance, we were certain that: the Cold War would outlast our lifetimes; the Soviet Union would just get stronger, they well might beat the Americans to the moon, but thank heavens at least, never threaten Our Canadian Game, hockey; the Beatles, who we'd just seen on Ed Sullivan's TV show, would disappear into oblivion by Christmas; and as for Hollywood, well certainly it had produced its last biblical film—no market for them in the future. And then, the old institutions: the monarchy would be gone long before the end of the century, but then so would most of the Church, except for the Pope, of course, who needless to say would be yet another Italian. ... what else?

How's that for foresight? But, actually few firm predictions prove accurate over the years, whether from journalists, futurologists, sociologists, or, need I say, intelligence agencies. This suggests a pretty obvious note of caution to always keep in mind: Be wary of bold predictions about this or that "trend that seems irreversible." Don't take too much to heart gloomy "death knells for a way of life". Oh, the media loves these.

But we all see through a glass darkly. And over the years I've found many institutions, like great university colleges, mainstream churches, yes, even the old hyper-modest Presbyterian Church, are a lot tougher, more flexible, and formidable, than we think.

I'm no theologian, forgive any blunders on that ground, but what has truly surprised me over many years is not the triumph of trends, which flicker and fade like shadows at summer twilight, but rather the survival of spiritual hunger. This spiritual hunger

and a religious "force-field" that springs from it is the human drive to serve, and to help others. It's so very much greater than I had imagined, and I've seen it blaze forth in places far darker, more threatening, than I could have imagined. The surprise, I suppose, was my surprise. For this "force" has been there, after all, from the very beginning of Christianity, and mysteriously seems never to weaken nor grow weary. But I do wish to tell you something of what I have observed as a reporter, and finally come to believe very deeply.

I've found there is no movement, or force, closer to the raw truth of war, famines, crises, and the vast human predicament, than organized Christianity in action.

For many years I've been struck by the rather blithe notion, spread in many circles including the media, and taken up by a rather large section of our younger population that organized, mainstream Christianity has been reduced to a musty, dimly lit backwater of contemporary life, a fading force. Well, I'm here to tell you from what I've seen from my "ring-side seat" at events over decades that there is nothing that is further from the truth. That notion is a serious distortion of reality. I've found there is *no* movement, or force, closer to the raw truth of war, famines, crises, and the vast human predicament, than organized Christianity in action. And there is no alliance more determined and dogged in action than church workers, ordained and lay members, when mobilized for a common good.

It is these Christians who are right "On the Front Lines" of committed humanity today, and when I want to find that front, I follow their trail. It is a vast front stretching from the most impoverished reaches of the developing world to the hectic struggle to preserve caring values in our own towns and cities. I have never been able to reach these front lines without finding Christian volunteers already in the thick of it, mobilizing congregations that care, and being a faithful witness to truth, the primary light in the darkness and so often, the only light. .

Now this is something the media and government officials rarely acknowledge, for religion confuses many, and anyway, we all like to blow our own horns. So front line efforts of Christianity do not usually produce headlines, and unfortunately this feeds the myth that the Church just follows along, to do its modest bit. Let me repeat, I've never reached a war zone, or famine group or crisis anywhere where some Church organization was not there long before me ... sturdy, remarkable souls usually too kind to ask "what took you so long."

I don't slight any of the hard work done by other religions or those wonderful secular NGO's I've dealt with so much over the years. They work closely with Church efforts, they are noble allies. But no, so often in desperate areas it is Christian groups there first, that labour heroically during the crisis and continue on long after all the media, and the visiting celebrities have left.

Now I came to this admiring view slowly and reluctantly. At the start of my career I'd largely abandoned religion for I too regarded the Church as a rather tiresome irrelevance. What ultimately persuaded me otherwise, and I took a lot of persuading, was the reality of Christianity's mission, physically and in spirit, before my very eyes. It wasn't the attraction of great moments of grandeur, although I admit covering this

Pope on six of his early trips abroad, including his first one to Mexico and then epic returns to Poland, certainly shook any assumptions I had of Christianity as a fading force. No, the millions upon millions gathered was impressive, but I was more moved by quiet individual moments of character, and courage that seems to be anchored to some deep core within Christianity.

I remember a dim stairwell in Gdansk, Poland. As many of you remember the first, unbelievable crack in the mighty Communist empire, which had so often proclaimed triumph over religion, occurred in Poland in the early 1980's when the solidarity movement, supported by the Church, rose to challenge tyranny, under the leadership of a most unlikely little shipyard electrician Lech Walensa. Later he'd win the Nobel Prize and become president of Poland, but when I met Walensa he was isolated, had been jailed, and his life was so often threatened I thought he was a dead man walking. We all assumed security forces were arranging one of those convenient "accidents" that really did happen in that frightening climate of oppression. Just like the movies.

A few of us met him alone on this stairwell as he slipped out to Mass. Are you frightened, one of us asked? He stopped, looked surprised at the thought. Then answered in a voice of steel: "No, I am afraid of no one, and nothing, only God." And he walked out alone into the night. It was a transcendent moment. Here in this dingy stairwell was the purest courage and conscience backed by Christian faith that I suddenly realized no force of empire or terror could ever extinguish. Years later, in Poland again, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Romania. ... I watched that empire crumble away before civil rights movements that often began in equally dingy little church halls and basements, early gatherings the outside world never even knew about, and would not have taken seriously if it had. A lot of good things start out quietly, in humble church halls.

There were other moments. With Bishop Tutu in Soweto in South Africa under apartheid, as he counselled Christians of all races how to mobilize against injustice without losing one's humanity, and as Reverend Martin Luther King had done in America's segregated south, after he'd got his movement rolling in some Birmingham church halls.

I witnessed so many other Church efforts. Saving children in Mozambique from life on garbage dumps; schools for illiterate ex-field hands in the slums of Brazil; the quiet comforting of runaways and addicts in a thousand asphalt city jungles; small groups of Christians visiting the lonely and mentally fragile in low-income boarding house flats; the out of the cold program right here in Toronto. Groups from many churches work in famine camps, feeding, saving, comforting the dying, and somehow keeping everyone's morale up on the worst days. In my mind I was struck by some words tolling again and again, like a bell: "Even here," churches seemed to say "Even here," however remote or wretched or dangerous. "Even here" we will be by your side, even to the end.

One memory, the murderous civil war in El Salvador in the early 1980's, a war of almost casual massacres, when we came to quake before the term "right wing death squads." Death squads that would kill any they imagine in favour of real reform, from landless peasants to Archbishop Romero in his own Cathedral, to even nuns. And pity the journalist they ran across. So we always made a strict rule to be back in the capital before dark, for it was suicidal to be on the roads at night. One afternoon,

while interviewing a small group of landless refugees well to the north, we misjudged the time.

The light began to thicken, jungle sounds seemed to grow heavy with menace. As the air grew clammy, we could all sense each other's growing nervousness. Just as we were furiously packing up, a delegation of refugee elders begged us to spend the night because, they pleaded, death squads were active in the area and perhaps our presence might just avoid the kidnapping of males, or worse, a massacre. It was one of those moments when I cursed the day I'd become a foreign correspondent. We too were targets. So we debated, and rationalized, as scared people do: "We needed to get back, a satellite feed was waiting, jobs were on the line, what good would it do if we too were killed and the story never got out ... yet how could we leave?"

... "you don't harm them, without coming through us first" ...

We were still debating when an old station wagon raced into camp in a cloud of dust. Out stepped three Christian aid workers baring a Red Cross flag. They listened to the discussion, and finally insisted, "No, the journalists must go. It's critical they get word out that you're at risk here. We'll stay the night and perhaps we can protect you." All over that awful war there were small Christian groups trying to stave off killings. And so we left, with inexpressible relief. Later we learned the protection that night, by these Samaritans, worked. There were no killings. But I've often wondered what I would have done if that battered station wagon had not arrived at that moment.

Courage facing down terror, and you know, I can hardly tell you how common such action is. This very night, somewhere in El Salvador, Columbia, Guatemala, some hillside in Brazil, volunteers from a local parish will be out trying to protect the weakest from political or criminal attacks. Saying "you don't harm them, without coming through us first," for "even here" God's message will be heard. And I know that today in Southern Sudan, aid workers are likely guiding bands of women and young children across rivers to safety, as they flee modern day slave raiders from the north. Yes, I've worked behind the lines there, and incredibly the Christian anti-slavery work still has to continue.

I should note that when there are human rights abuses anywhere, the Church is often the first into action—for who has better sources on the ground after all? Church reports often help galvanize Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the United Nations into effective action.

And I'd like to clear up tonight something about how the outside world usually gets to know of famines and mass suffering.

In 1984, I along with my friend Michael Buerk of BBC fame, first carried the story of the great Ethiopian famine on television. The world reacted as we all know, and TV was given much of the credit for saving millions. But we were not the first. We went, because for months Church and aid groups on the ground had seen famine coming and had been beseeching the world to take notice. When we finally managed to get in, against considerable Ethiopian government resistance, it was these groups that

showed us where to go, gave us rides on their relief flights into the mountains, and mapped out where and how the world had to react.

These Christian "foreign legionnaires," as I've come to think of them, never cease to amaze. Once, flying to a disaster story, our twin-engine plane had to make an emergency refueling stop at a nearly deserted landing strip in the dense jungle in central Africa. We stepped out into the middle of absolutely nowhere it seemed, only to be greeted by a cheerful Dutch Reform Minister offering tea. My veteran cameraman Mike Sweeny later sighed in exasperation, "Do you think you could ever get us to a story, somewhere, anywhere where those Christians aren't there first!!!" I was never able to.

I rather regret that the term muscular Christianity has gone out of use, because a lot of the Christianity I've seen is very hard muscular work, where there's lots of sweat and dirty hands. The spirit of Dietrich Bonhoeffer is alive.

Many of us in news crews noticed something else hard to put into words. So often after a day in the field filming volunteers at work, we'd be sitting back over our nightly drink and one of us would say something like: "Strange people those, know what I mean? There's just something different about them. They've got something that we don't."

I believe that a form of human happiness emerges when based on a flourishing life in which spirit and intellect are used to the full, for the purpose of the good of all. Yes, they seemed to be "flourishing." C.S. Lewis wrote of Christianity producing "a good infection." Christian work on the front lines infects those around them, even those who are not Christian, with a sense of Christ's deep mystery and power. I've felt it. It changes the world. Still.

I'm often asked if I lost belief in God covering events like Ethiopia, then called "the worst hell on earth". Actually, like others before me, it was precisely in such hells that I rediscovered religion. I saw so many countless acts of human love and charity, total respect for the most forsaken, for *all* life. I was confronted by the miracle of our humanity. And I felt again the "good infection" of Christian volunteers, and heard again those words tolling "Even ere.Even here."

Now I know just witnessing good deeds, however daring, is not quite enough. I felt lost on the front lines without a deeper understanding of Christianity, which is so deep a religion. I needed just the kind of theological guidance that you graduating here tonight will have to give.

I once celebrated Christmas in secret, along with five or six colleagues in Beirut, during the worst months of the murderous civil war in the '80's. We were among very few outsiders left in the western, or Muslim part of the city. That December, one extremist militia threatened to fire on any Christian celebration they saw, even at Christmas lights. I hasten to add this was completely uncharacteristic of Muslims there, who couldn't have been kinder or more tolerant of strangers despite years of war's provocation. But this small minority was murderous in its hate, and had patrols out looking for us.

Well, we foreign correspondents were as wild a carousing band of cynical hacks as you'd find anywhere. But you never fully value Christianity and its forms until they're

denied you. So we decided we have our Christmas whatever the threat. We hung blankets over the window to avoid attention from the patrolling militia outside, bought each other \$4 limit presents, even made a funny little tree with real, flickering candles. Lots of fun, homesickness, and quiet reflection, a moment I'll never forget.

And yet something was missing, we still didn't know our way through this religious moment. We needed a guide to the Bible, even a small sermon, to fully grasp the overpowering emotion that clutched at our very throats. We needed one of you there with us.

... my own experience has convinced me that Christianity is best shared with others.

So summing up my own experience has convinced me that Christianity is best shared with others. I'm no longer one who can say I'll just do it my way. Christianity needs organization, and dare I say the Word, even institutions. Beyond organization, the Church must have trained people to deal with the perplexing, endlessly challenging intellectual depths of Christianity—theology that is profound, but also capable of being shared and spread out before all. It needs "guides" who can mobilize mind and spirit, as well as work in that humble church hall, with its coffee, biscuits, and triangular shaped sandwiches.

For of course the "front lines" I speak of are not only found on some hilltop in Ethiopia, or in the sinister dusk of a distant jungle. You don't have to go abroad in the "Christian foreign legion" to find yourself in the thick of action. The front lines run through our own society, through this city, perhaps through this campus. Yes, "Even here." And the Church is to the fore, far out in front of the media and politicians in dealing with the needs of our fragmented society.

In whatever community you serve you'll find extraordinary challenges: of aging, addictions, homelessness, spiritual despair. And yes you'll have fabulous moments as you help celebrate that uplifting spiritual hunger—that desire to serve, to celebrate, to sing out and to come together in the kind of flourishing joy that leads to fullness in living.

What life is compressed within a single church! You'll have to deal with fractious church committees, you'll be lobbied by this side or that, and all the while you will have to make sure the bills are paid. There will be times of maximum challenge when all your skills are tested to the full. Imagine ministers who had to preach right after September 11th. You'll have to work within a society facing far more stresses, and religious and ethnic complexities than we could have imagined back in the sixties. A richer society in so many ways, the challenges are so exciting, and I know you have been well trained at Knox College, to meet them. Your church hall could be very busy.

And so to close—your friends and families are justly proud of you tonight, as is Knox College, and, I imagine, any fine old Presbyterian spirits from long ago classes that still circle around in this happy air. I'm glad to be here to join them all in

congratulating you, and in wishing you God speed as you set out to, or return to, the Front Lines.

Brian Stewart is one of Canada's most experienced journalists. He is host of the foreign affairs show CBC News: Worldview as well as senior correspondent of the CBC flagship news hour The National. Stewart has received the Gemini Award as "Best Overall Broadcast Journalist" as well as numerous other awards. As a foreign correspondent he has covered many of the world's conflicts, reporting from nine war zones from El Salvador to Beirut.

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