

Part 1

Friday night's outreach started out on the wrong foot – literally. A team member tripped over a wire strung across the sidewalk and fell flat on her face. She was determined to continue but when she started feeling intense pain one of us took her back to her room. Heading to the red light area I began to cross the main street when a huge pink tour bus made a sudden illegal u-turn and came charging toward us barely missing the woman behind me. "Oh God, get us back in sync with your plans. I'm not sure what is going on here," I prayed.

We reached the main entertainment plaza and I heard my name. Turning around, I saw "Gomer." The white fluffy party dress and faux-pearls around her neck didn't hide her weariness. We hugged her as a mother does a child, drawing her into a safe space. She said she had been in the hospital for three days getting treatment for mental illness. She stopped talking and reached into her big pink handbag. I waited, expecting to see the doctor's report but instead she pulled out a mask and put it on her face. Assuring us it wasn't the H1N1 flu, she continued her story. She was sore from shots and her stomach was in pain. "You need to go home and rest," I told her. She said, "Oh, I won't have sex tonight. I can't. The doctor told me not to." She was hoping for customers who would pay her 500 baht (\$15) just to be a companion and talk. She had no place to go. No room. She would sleep on the street but she needed money to get her social medical card renewed.

Sounds easy enough; take her in. Put her up in the shelter. But Gomer has been coming and going for three years. The last time we took her back she went out, got drunk and returned the next morning with the customer. When told the customer could not enter the shelter, she left with him. There is no full-time house mother and there are children in the shelter. Who would look after her? Emily tried calling the volunteers who help us to shelter victims. No answer. Gomer has been gang-raped before on the street and I didn't want her sleeping there in this condition. Finally Emily got through so we waited with her until she was safely picked up. A Thai vendor was watching curiously. She walked up to Gomer and asked her, "What's wrong?" Muffled by the face mask, Gomer

answered, "Psychologically I'm not doing well." That convinced the Thai lady that she should warn us off of getting involved. As Gomer left with the volunteer we explained to the lady, "Yes we know she drinks alcohol; yes, we know she sleeps with men every night; yes, we know she has some psychological problems. We have known her for years. We love her very much. She is our sister – our daughter, and we will keep on loving her for as long as it takes." She nodded not quite sure what to think. Gomer was in good hands and safe for another night and our work was just beginning.

DIVINE CONNECTIONS

September 2, 2009

Part 2

Waiting for God's prompting we passed one bar after another. "C" bar came my mind. As we went through the curtain I looked up and saw ladyboys dancing. The bar had just been changed to an all ladyboys bar. I must have been mistaken and heard God wrong. As we turned and walked out, I stared with disapproval at the policeman sitting comfortably at the entrance in his usual position. Emily called and I turned to see "Tom" sitting outside. I had prayed with Tom in a different bar back in January. Tom, one of the mamasans, is a large man dressed in a yellow jacket wearing make-up and earrings. Tom is a very sweet and gentle person who feels like a woman trapped in a man's body. I struggle to choose the appropriate pronoun. I find it difficult to call him her, but when I call her him I feel like I am rejecting the identity he has chosen. Tom tells us that he/she is bored with this work. "It is all about sex," Tom tells us. Tom wants relationships that build from friendship as opposed to relationships that start with sex and are all about sex. Tom said it feels dirty. "I'm tired of it but the owner likes me," Tom said. "How much do you get paid?" I asked. "12,000 baht a month," Tom said. "But if I had a good job that paid 8000 baht I'd take it to feel better."

"I believe in God, you know." Tom had told me that in January. Tom went to a Catholic school growing up and a Christian-sponsored high school. Nikki, another team member, said she had Tom on her mind tonight when we passed the old bar and had regretted not stopping. "God brought us here to you tonight," I told

Tom. "6th sense," Tom asked? "No, God." I told Tom how we ask God to lead us to the person God wants us to talk with. I said, "God had you on His mind tonight. All these people working here and God brought us to you." Tom looked pleased. I asked how I could pray. Tom said he doesn't like the way he is; in between sexes. He wants to be complete as a woman. He has felt more female since preschool. I held Tom's hands and prayed that "Tom" would find his true identity in Christ and know God's love with confidence. I prayed God would provide a better job and reveal the good plans God has for Tom's life. Tom thanked me and asked for my number. He wants to surprise me and come to church some Sunday. Tom wanted to know if dress was casual. "Yes," I answered, wondering if he would be wearing the long dangly earrings and make-up. I hope he comes. I hope she comes. I hope the first people he/she meets are those who will welcome Tom as he/she is. I'm fairly confident this church will be welcoming. The pastor has told me before that Tom would be welcome. Thailand has many transvestites and transsexuals working in many sectors so there are many opportunities to know and love them. Of course, there are still many who avoid knowing them because it is easier to judge and exclude when you don't know and love someone. Thai society though is generally more accepting of those who call themselves "ladyboys." Tom has many skills and will be a great asset to an organization like ours some day. My mind envisions the possibilities. Only God knows.

DIVINE CONNECTIONS

September 11, 2009

Part 3

After two divine encounters, the night was still young and we headed to a show bar. This bar is a hard one to visit because of all the nudity and sex shows taking place through the night. Last visit we met a woman who was new and unhappy and we were drawn to return to her. Fortunately, we found the woman we knew fairly quickly and got caught up in a conversation. When we focus on the women in conversation, the background fades and is less daunting. Beng wasn't so lucky. The man sitting to her side was "entertaining" a woman by exposing

himself. Disgusted and somewhat nauseated, Beng turned her back to them and faced the shows.

I know two of the girls who do the sex shows – lesbian shows. My heart aches when they perform. One I've known since she was 15 – dropped out of school to support her siblings' education. I prayed for the infant daughter of the second when she was critically ill. Sweet young women, dedicated to supporting their families. I look to the stage just long enough to smile at their eyes but not enough to dismantle the invisible masks they wear and cause them to feel embarrassed. They feel lucky because doing the shows means a lot of money without being forced to have sex with the men. It is a choice I am grateful I have never had to make.

The woman sitting with me only makes half what the other girls make because she keeps her bikini on when she dances. After trying for three weeks she really doesn't like it. She would like to work as a maid or with kids. Her husband of 10 years became so abusive she ran away and reported him to the police. He is still out of jail though and she is careful to stay away from his networks. Now she is stuck with this job to get by. I know we are full at NightLight. I know we don't have the funds or the space to keep hiring women, but, in faith, I write down our number for her and tell her that she can come by and apply for work if interested. Grateful, she rolled it up and stuck it in her high boots. We gave her a hug, paid our bills and left.

Going down the stairs I feel drops of rain drizzling down. Not enough for an umbrella and not enough to wash away the sadness. Not enough to deter the customers. Sex shows are addictive and even rain doesn't deter an addict. Money is addictive, especially when your family depends on it and you have no other way of paying your bills. Desperation forces women out to meet the demands of desperate men. An exchange is made for a fantasy that eludes reality and more often than not turns into a nightmare. The rain is only enough to

draw attention to the somber and heavy burdens beneath the fluttering neon signs.

The night is still young for those seeking to exchange brokenness for fantasy. The night has been long for the light bearers though. Darkness retreats in the light but dawn is still a long ways away and we are weary. We have met our divine appointments. For a few moments we saw the light interrupt the night's agenda. A little bit of hope. I glance across the way and see Tom sitting outside the bar conspicuous in his bright yellow jacket. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot master it. His bright yellow jacket is a sign of hope. A few more hours and the darkness will retreat again giving way to the agenda of light.