

## **Jesus' Barrio: Inmates As Apostles**

by Chris Hoke

*Christian Century Magazine, November 2012*

My friend Neaners called me collect from a Washington State prison yesterday. His voice echoed in the small hallway where he stood handcuffed. He told me he was back in the hole—back in solitary confinement.

“I guess one of the homies took off on a cop,” he said, “and then a fight popped off.” Neaners was born José Israel Garcia. Since he'd once been the leader of a Mexican gang in the Northwest (after joining the hood as a ten-year-old), the prison officer assumed that Neaners had orchestrated the fight as well as the assault on the police officer. Officers came to his cell, he told me, to tell him that the investigator wanted to talk. I could imagine him standing there with his tattoos on his arms and face, his shaved head, and I knew that he was answering honestly when he told officers that he knew nothing about the incident. “But then,” Neaners said, “the investigator told me, ‘OK, Garcia, turn around and cuff up,’ and took me to the hole.”

The investigator assumed wrong. Despite his past and reputation (all recorded in the open file on the investigator's desk), Neaners has been changing over the years. I know, because his long process of change has also changed me.

I was a new volunteer chaplain at the Skagit County Jail seven years ago when Neaners dubbed me “pastor” of his entire network of homies. Since then, we've been locked into a relationship of mutual transformation.

In a way we adopted each other. He welcomed me, a white college-graduated Christian kid, into the hidden world of criminal street gangs—not into gang membership, but into the hidden pain and need of his community members. He invited both my prayers and my friendship, and over the years I ended up welcoming him, a tattooed and violent felon, into the family of God. That means that he now has a long email list of Christian friends from various denominations and traditions who write to him, pray for him like a nephew, post his photo on their fridge and sometimes put money on his

books so the gang doesn't have to. When he gets out he'll have a ministry waiting for him at Tierra Nueva, our organization here in Washington's Skagit Valley. There is a bed reserved for him, and church folks and former gang members who are ready to help Neaners become a father to his two young daughters. And we are ready to begin, together, his vision for advanced gang ministry.

He calls this vision Hope for Homies. Neaners wants to work with local churches, ministries, families, farms and businesses to create a safe environment, a place where tattooed gang bangers and the young women who live in the gangs' shadows do not have to be around breaths of threat and murder but can instead plant vegetables and learn job skills. On this farm setting, they can begin to let a new kind of love undo the wreckage of abuse and trauma that's locked deep within many of them. He envisions a place where society's orphans and the shaved-headed children of illegal aliens can come together and belong to one another.

Gathering the unwanted and angry youth on the streets is what he always wanted his *barrio*—or gang—to do in the first place. Gangs excel in going out into the streets and shadows and finding the lost. They “jump them in,” often calling the ritual the new members’ “baptism.” They protect their adoptees, share all they have with them, arm them with skills and a tangible form of power, and then send them out on “missions.” They lay down their lives for one another. They are willing to be arrested for their missions.

I recognized that these gang youth were the perfect recruits for the ministry of Jesus—not necessarily recruits for domestic church participation, choir rehearsals and session meetings. But they had a readiness for raw apostolic movement in places that most of us avoid.

In Jesus' larger body—or *barrio*—Neaners is now finding a kind of love that his gang never offered. Street leaders like him can teach our churches a lot about practices of spiritual adoption, discipleship and mission. In fact, while still in prison, Neaners has been reaching criminal youth in neighboring cells. These are youth whom I could never reach. He is teaching me, through the letters that arrive from state penitentiaries, about the mystery of redemption in a human heart.

The apostle Paul admits that he was once a “violent aggressor” (1 Tim. 1:13, NASB). The Christians were afraid of him. He was an enemy, “entering house after house, dragging off both men and women” and “breathing threats and murder” (Acts 8:3, 9:1). He was a man from whom they hid

their children and locked their doors—not someone they’d welcome into their worship gatherings, let alone their homes. He was probably not someone they could see themselves following as a leader of their movement.

I’ve read the story of Saul’s conversion with gang youth behind bars in the U.S. and in Guatemala City. These young men have no trouble identifying with the “young man named Saul” who they see holding the coats of those who stoned Stephen (Acts 7:58). Most of these youth witnessed horrific bloodshed in the streets of their youth, and like Saul, have grown up participating in acts like those they witnessed. They can relate: Christians in churches fear them, yet occasionally these young men sense that God is speaking to them on the road.

It has taken longer for me to appreciate and identify with the role of Ananias. He was a timid church insider whom God called out of his comfort zone and into the night to visit this feared Saul.

Apparently the risen Christ, with his mysterious light, had already reached the violent man on the streets—without the church’s help! Now God wanted to involve God’s church. At first Ananias protested, as most of us would, saying, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done. . .” But God said, “Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel” (Acts 9:13, 15).

God wanted Saul, and God wanted the timid Church to lay hands on this man to be transformed along with him.

Ananias found Saul alone in a room, powerless, much like Neaners in a prison cell. Saul was probably as unsure of his future as the hundreds of gang youth I’ve met who’ve had profound and disorienting encounters with God but don’t know what to do next. It turns out that these Road-to-Damascus experiences are common; the unanticipated miracle is when a church insider shows up in the dark prison or motel room to take one of them home.

I believe the conversion of Saul-Paul would have died stillborn in that room in Damascus if it weren’t for this second miracle. He would have been stuck there, alone and blind and lost. The church never would have known its greatest apostle; he might have simply hardened there in the

darkness like so many others hidden in jails and seedy motels and cramped apartments across our land. Saul's conversion cannot be separated from Ananias's conversion.

When Ananias laid hands on the man that he feared, something shifted inside of him. I've had the same experience during my years of visiting and praying with men like Neaners. Ananias did not tell Saul to repent and turn from his violent ways. Rather, as he prayed for Saul to recover his sight, Ananias seemed to gain new sight as well. Saul, on the one hand, was entirely passive in the story. He said nothing, and showed no clear signs of being a reformed man. Ananias, on the other hand, had been transformed: the next thing he did was to take Saul home, back to the others!

The conversions of Saul and Ananias impacted the ongoing conversion of the local community of Christians. Saul would not have become Apostle Paul if the local church had not welcomed him and his budding apostolic message. The Damascus congregation could have said something like, "Ananias, this is *your* project, we never authorized this at committee. Besides, we have to look out for the children first." Instead, they stuck by the former aggressor Saul when the authorities came looking for him. And when Saul was in danger, they helped him escape in a basket (Acts 9:25). Then when the church elders in Jerusalem were understandably skeptical about trusting a former menace, another inside, Barnabas, spoke up for him.

Paul was welcomed in radical faith. Years later he would call this saving dynamic he'd experienced "the spirit of adoption" (Rom. 8:15). It's not just inclusion into the group; it's something more mysterious, a spirit that causes the adoptee to whisper, "Abba, Father." Neaners too now speaks, not of God in the abstract, but of our *Jefe*. Our Dad.

I'm seeing this spirit of adoption at work in other former gang members whom the Tierra Nueva staff have met in the jail and on the streets—guys like Ramon, Teddy and Evaristo. When we allow our prayers with them in the jail to penetrate our hearts, we are led to welcome these men into our community. Soon these guys are living in our building and sharing life with us like family.

These young men change the way we see the streets. As they reach out their hands to be led into a new life of faith alongside us, like weak Saul first walking into the midst of the Damascus believers,

they are simultaneously leading us. Neaners and Ramon and Teddy and Evaristo are new local apostles, giving *us* vision and passion and connections to hidden lives in the gang world.

This deep spiritual inclusion, this grafting-in (Rom. 11), was foundational to the hope Paul would proclaim—often while in prison. In fact, the word “hope” appears six times immediately after he names this “spirit of adoption.” Neaners writes the word in capital letters these days.

Yesterday on the collect call Neaners explained why an inmate had assaulted the officer: “I didn’t even know this guy, but I found out he only had 60 days left until his release—and he had *no one*. No family, no release address, no one. Just the streets.”

By attacking an officer, this desperate inmate was assured an extended stay in prison.

“He had no hope, homie,” Neaners said. “See, in here, if you need a soap, some socks, some coffee, whatever, we got your back. We share and take care of each other. We say goodnight. But out there this fool had no one to even say goodnight to him. No one wanted him.”

In other words, Neaners and ten others are back in the hole, and an officer was attacked, because another homie had no hope “That’s when it hit me hard,” Neaners said. “This is what God’s call, what our mission, is all about.”

With this collect call, Neaners was leading me from the front lines, teaching me, exhorting me and everyone working with us to think missionally about these tattooed “unreached people group” on the other side of town, on the other side of prison walls.

When we respond, taking the risk of bringing a Saul home with us, there will be fewer aggressors to fear. But more importantly, the church will gain the apostles we most need in this age, apostles who will lead us where we’ve never been before.

*Chris Hoke is jail chaplain and gang pastor for Tierra Nueva, a ecumenical ministry in Burlington, Washington, that works with migrant farm workers, jail inmates, Skagit Valley gang members and those struggling with addiction.*