

Other Sheep Collaborates with Lutheran Seminary and Methodist Universities in Brazil to develop significant projects - Outgrowth of Tom Hanks' Speaking Tour to three Brazilian cities, May 12-22, 2007

by **Rev. Dr. Tom Hanks**
Buenos Aires, Argentina

Sparked by one of my former students in Costa Rica (1985), professors of gender studies and related subjects in three Methodist universities and one Lutheran seminary arranged for me to speak on Homophobia and the Bible, May 12-22, in three cities in Brazil (Rio de Janeiro, Belo Horizonte and Porto Alegre with its suburb Sao Leopoldo). Due to last minute opposition from two Methodist bishops, organizers had to scramble to arrange for meetings to be held off campus, but with the accompanying free publicity attendance was excellent (30 profs and 120 students in the largest ones) and a 20-minute television interview provided an opportunity to communicate an alternate viewpoint to a wider general public.

In addition to speaking and teaching opportunities, the networking resulting from the trip is leading to Other Sheep collaboration in developing a number of projects.

- University scholarships for retraining pastors and other religious leaders who lose their employment due to discrimination for their sexual orientation—something that desperately needs duplication almost everywhere, including the USA.
- Lectureships that will provide dynamic academic spokespersons to combat homophobia in grade schools,

high schools and every university discipline.

- Review and evaluation of library holdings and curriculum content in each institution. My few minutes with the computer in one university library revealed 67 titles (mainly in Portuguese), much to everyone's surprise. Term papers and theses should soon result that will increase understanding and "concientización" — perhaps even lead to some new courses.
- Children's books and literature focusing on Bible stories about alternate households in the Bible (the main kind—I have a list of 41 possible stories for children). Two professors were already at work in this area, but had not included any Bible stories.
- The formation of Other Sheep nuclei of professors seeking to network, strengthen gender-studies programs and transform sexual education in Brazilian institutions.

In lectures I stressed the importance (1) of not giving away the Bible to our adversaries in the struggle against homophobia; (2) of not giving away the history of the church by ignoring/censoring countless documented heroic alternative voices, often martyred for teaching or incarnating alternate sexual views and practices; (3) of not giving away today's church to spokespersons (especially the Vatican) who pretend to speak for millions but often

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Above Photo: *Two continents - same story.* Steve Parelli (left) from the USA and E. Ruben Villaverde from Argentina, compare like stories. Both were evangelical Baptist pastors when they came out.
—Mendoza, Argentina. July 27, 2006

Nothing in the World Can Make Me Turn Back

by **Eduardo Ruben Villaverde**
Mendoza, Argentina

I will never forget the month of July, 2006. It is the month of my "Coming Out." Up until then my testimony would not be very different from so many others who after many years of living in denial of their sexual orientation – in effect, living a

"double life" by acting straight though gay - at last experience the liberating power of confession and transparency. What was particular in my case was I was a pastor of a Baptist church of a congregation of 500. It was the church I had founded in Mendoza, Argentina. I had led
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the church for almost 15 years with great blessings.

The price for continuing this "I'm-straight" farce was costly. I paid dearly in terms of mental, emotional, and spiritual health. The good results that were accomplished through pastoral labor were always obscured by my own personal anguish as a gay man acting straight. The anguish grew worse from day to day. I felt trapped in a labyrinth which seemed impossible to exit.

I had married after about three years into my pastorate. The 12 year marriage – right up to my

"Coming Out" – was disastrous. The unhappy marriage fed into the worst part of me. It became a prison, a self-imposed sentence.

But on that July day, I experienced a deep inward brokenness that unleashed within me a strength that led me to stand before my brothers and sisters in Christ and openly speak my truth, my struggle and my desire. *I am a gay Christian man.*

The reactions were various, but that did not matter to me. For the first time in my life I was not seeking to please everyone. Instead, I was trying to be

myself, to receive the healing that I had so many times preached to others, to start a new day.

The consequences for this transparency were terrible. The religious "machine" was unalterable as always and for the next few weeks they declared me a "lost cause" and turned me over to the "hands of Satan" (a very interesting interpretation of 1 Corinthians 5).

This July marks my first "Coming Out" anniversary. Things have not been easy. I still find myself without work and my finances are in the red. Most of my brothers and sisters in Christ and most of my friends have disappeared... *but nothing in the world would make me turn back.* I have regained joy. I have hope. And what is more important, I know that God's love for me is unconditional. Nothing can be worse than what I have already lived and experienced. By faith I go forward, uniting my heart with so many others who have also made the long journey from night to day. May God, our Liberator, bless us.

Editor's note: E. Ruben Villaverde, prior to and following his coming out, found great help in Tom Hanks and others of Other Sheep in Buenos Aires. Upon learning that Steve was a Baptist minister like himself and was visiting Argentina (2006), he requested a meeting. Jose and Steve spent two wonderful days with Ruben in Mendoza, July 28 & 29, on their way to Chile.



Photo at Left

Auditorium of Pueblo Nuevo Fundacion Cristiana, home to a Baptist congregation of about 500 at the time their pastor, E. Ruben Villaverde, "came out" to them.

July 2006.
Mendoza,
Argentina



Maranatha and Others Lead GAY Parade, NYC

Sixteen years ago, Tom Hanks, reporting on "the turbulent 1991 meeting in Mexico" of the worldwide leaders of the International Lesbian and Gay Association, noted that leaders "were asked what their biggest obstacle was. Without exception they replied in various ways, 'Religion!' 'And what are you doing to address the problem?' Most replied 'Nothing, because I'm not religious.'

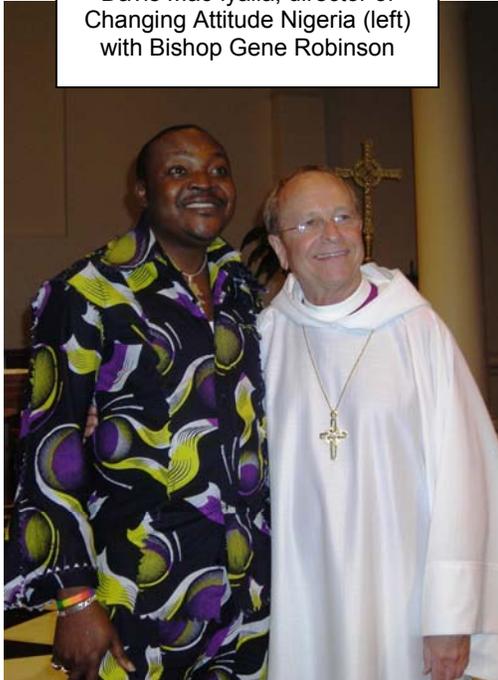
More and more non-religious gay activist organizations are intelligently and compassionately addressing religion.

This year in New York City, the annual gay pride parade was led by religious groups. Maranatha of The Riverside Church once again participated with a grand float featuring a free standing rainbow.

—Steve Parelli, Bronx, NY

Photo: Partners Carol Lee (center) & Dr. Juanita Kirton (right) with her son Terrey! Kirton and his aunt Cecile Kirton (left). Maranatha Float.

Davis Mac-Iyalla, director of Changing Attitude Nigeria (left) with Bishop Gene Robinson



"Gay Nigerians know what we believe. We need to know how to defend it. Send us the books." – Davis Mac-Iyalla

by **Steve Parelli**, Bronx, NY

After meeting Davis Mac-Iyalla, director of Changing Attitude Nigeria, for the first time at the 2006 ILGA (International Lesbian and Gay Association) World Conference in Geneva, Switzerland, I had the privilege, as a party of one, of welcoming him at the New York City JFK airport upon his first visit to the United States, Wednesday, May 14, 2007.

He was here by invitation of the Episcopal Church for a speaking tour in the States on the topic of gay rights in Nigeria.

Mac-Iyalla's USA tour-host had

asked that I keep the conversation light and not talk business: "Let him relax after his long flight." I agreed.

After Mac-Iyalla and I had gotten a bite to eat and were on the road cutting across Brooklyn towards Manhattan, to my delight he asked about getting *the* books to Africa, the topic I had introduced more than a year ago at Geneva.

Jesus MCC of Indianapolis, Indiana, and Other Sheep are in the process of getting copies of *The Children Are Free* to LGBT groups in Africa.

"Gay Nigerians know what we believe," he said. "We need to know how to defend it. Send us the books."

Go to www.othersheep.org and scroll down to "New Web Pages and Current Notes of Interest at Other Sheep" for a full coverage of Davis Mac-Iyalla's visit to The Church of the Holy Apostles and related articles of Nigeria and Changing Attitude, the Anglican ministry to LGBTs.

A Manhattan law firm; a hymn; & Kenya, Africa

by **Steve Parelli**, Bronx, NY

When we came to the words of the chorus of the hymn "Here I Am, Lord," a flood gate of tears suddenly and silently streamed down my face.

*Here I am Lord.
Is it I Lord?
I have heard you calling in the night.
I will go Lord, if you lead me.
I will hold your people in my heart.*

This was not the time to lose one's composure. It was Pride Sunday 2007 at The Riverside Church and my partner, Jose, and I were next in the order of worship. We were to step to the pulpit together and publicly read the Hebrew Bible Lesson, each reading alone his part, the passage having been divided between us.

The words of the chorus gripped my heart, each phrase capturing that one single moment in my life when I had asked *Is it I Lord?* In 2001, I was working as a paralegal in a huge law firm in Rockefeller Center when I

mentally pictured myself, someday, somehow, investing myself in the purchase and distribution of religious books on topics relating to homosexuality and Christianity. My vision was very local. As a former Baptist minister, I wanted to speak to my own fellowship of churches, the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches. I wanted to put a face on homosexuality.

But now, six years later, my partner and I were a mere ten days away from departing for Kenya, East Africa, where together with Emmanuel Kamau, we would distribute the same kind of literature I had mentally pictured I would distribute in up state New York. I had imagined none of this in 2001 when I had asked *Is it I Lord?*

I have heard you calling in the night riveted in my soul. I continued to dry my face with the napkin my partner had lovingly pressed into my hand. How appropriate *the night*. It was my darkest hour, 2001, when *the call* was gently embraced. I had been defrocked; completely alienated from family; disenfranchised from my fellow pastor-peers; locked out of my calling and career. Yet, *in this, my night*, I heard a *call*.

Jose smiled at me as I sheepishly looked at him out of the corner of my eye, slightly tilting my head his way. Kenya and a summer of ministry with LGBTs were on both our minds. He, too, was a lover of mission. His undergrad studies were in mission.

I felt his touch on my back. The touch I had earnestly prayed for. Daily, over the course of three years, I had pleaded with God in the early morning hours for the loving touch of a man. In 1997, I met Jose.

How many other gay Christians pray similar prayers? *I will hold your people in my heart* are, for me, those marginalized people the world over whom the church has rejected; they are known and loved by God. Collectively, as gay Christians, it is perhaps for us to hold them in our hearts, and go, if we can, to them.

As the chorus filled the sanctuary one last time, Jose and I made our way to the pulpit. The hymn was still stealing my heart, but I was resolved. No tears now. We waited at the pulpit until the music subsided. Then one small, weak voice lifted itself: mine . . . "Our Hebrew Bible Reading is taken from . . ."

Steve, Executive Director, and Jose, Coordinator for Africa, leave for Kenya, July 3, and return August 25

Some changes for the Kenya Project Summer 2007

by Jose Ortiz, Bronx, NY

After reviewing the original Kenya Project Summer 2007 plans with other LGBT leaders who are members of GALCK (Gay and Lesbian Coalition of Kenya), changes to the plan have been made. Originally, Ishtar MSM, the host group inviting Other Sheep, had made plans to conduct meetings in halls that will hold 50 to 80 people or more. However, because it is an election year in Kenya, gays and lesbian issues can be more volatile, and therefore Other Sheep's presence and work should be completely underground, so advised GALCK members.

Ishtar has decided, as counseled by GALCK members and with the full cooperation of Other Sheep, that small discussion groups of 5 or 6 should be conducted in place of large meetings. There will not be any advertising, not even the use of flyers. Progress reports will not be posted on the web.

Steve Parelli, Executive Director of Other Sheep, has expressed his cooperation and actually prefers conducting small groups for their first visit to Kenya with the anticipation of having real discussion and the opportunity to get to know the individual participants better.

Steve Parelli has said Other Sheep is willing to conduct groups throughout the day – morning, afternoon and evening – so that as many as would

like to participate may.

Discussion groups will be held weekly or twice weekly over a period of four weeks. 100 copies of *The Children Are Free* have been provided by Jesus MCC, Indianapolis, Indiana, and will be used for discussion along with *The Blue Book*, a publication of the Mount Kisco Presbyterian Church, Mount Kisco, New York.

The Children Are Free addresses the Bible and homosexuality. *The Blue Book* is in a question and answer format covering topics such as family, society, psychology and religion as they relate to homosexuality. Both books show excellent scholarship with extensive bibliographies.

In addition, Souforce and PFlag are providing pamphlets and videos that will introduce the concepts they teach.

After investing their time with Other Sheep in Nairobi, Steve and Jose hope to vacation for at least two weeks to relax and enjoy the beauty of Kenya before returning home.

Kenya costs incurred to date come to \$4,856.00 which include air fare, shots and meds, visas, travel insurance, tour books, and cost to fly Emmanuel Kamau R/T from TX to NYC for the March planning meeting. **Gifts received to date** from individuals have come to \$1,050.00. Your gifts are greatly appreciated.

Additional costs: Housing is between \$20-30 a night for five weeks in Nairobi; plus meals.

Other Sheep resource materials can be found at www.othersheep.org, www.fundotrasovejas.org.ar and www.othersheepexcite.com and may be freely copied and reprinted. Copied materials should indicate their source and be distributed free of charge. For address removal, correction or addition, contact Steve Parelli, Executive Director, at sparelli2002@yhao.com or by direct mail at 2962 Decatur Ave. 5D, Bronx, NY 10458. Home/Business Phone: 718-360-0884.

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Hanks in Brazil, May 2007

represent the ignorance and prejudice of relatively few. With students of marketing in one university we discussed the neglect of the booming gay market in their courses and homophobic mistranslation as a tool for marketing Bibles.

My trip, of course, was not Other Sheep's first foray into what is not just "another country," but almost half of Latin America. John Doner and Pepe Hernandez included Brazil in their historic pioneer missionary journey in 1994 (by bus from Mexico to Argentina and back) and were able to arrange for seven resource-documentation centers in key institutions. Also, my participation in the meeting of the ILGA (International Lesbian Gay Association) in Rio in 1995 even resulted in having my photo published along with Boy George in VEJA, the national news magazine (equivalent to Time or Newsweek)! Since then MCC (Metropolitan Community Churches) has been able to establish dynamic congregations in several cities and one of their pastors has translated some of our materials into Portuguese (see our website: www.fundotrasovjeas.org).

Rev. Dr. Thomas Hanks, co-founder of Other Sheep, is Other Sheep Theologian and Director of Mission. He authored the commentary on Romans and Hebrews in The Queer Bible Commentary, published in 2006.



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Other Sheep News is published quarterly by Other Sheep and is compiled and edited by Steve Parelli. John Doner is assistant editor. Other Sheep is Multicultural Ministries with Sexual Minorities, working world wide in an ever-expanding variety of languages, cultures and LGBT concerns, to share the good news that God loves all gay, lesbian bisexual and transgendered persons just as they are and calls them into inclusive, affirming, Christian communities.