

ICDF NETWORKS NEWSLETTER — JULY 2016

ICDF Network for Creative Arts & Social Concern

Contributor: Andrew Park, Network Coordinator

Editor's note: This article describes a portrayal of prejudice and violence in the film Laramie, as it relates to the issue of social concern. In this version of the article, the relevant paragraph has been italicised to alert readers to the distressing nature of the content.

Last night I watched the film *Laramie*. It is set in 1998. Following the brutal kidnapping and roadside-torture murder of gay university student Matthew Shepard, members of New York's Tectonic Theatre Project went to Laramie, Wyoming to research about what had happened and to hear about the communities' reactions. They interviewed over 200 residents before writing a play. They then wrote a play about it.

Laramie is a legendary US West town with a very strong evangelical Christian heritage.

I'm not going to outline the whole of the film here. Watch it for yourselves. But I will say that Matthew Shepard's death was a "hate crime" at the hands of two other young men – a Mormon and a Christian – who decided to 'teach him a lesson', by kidnapping him and tying him to a wire fence in the outskirts of Laramie, and beating him to within an inch of his life. And that was simply because they hated a gay man who they encountered in a bar, and who they feared would try to seduce them. So they beat him mercilessly for hours, and then left him naked and alone in the lonely countryside location, until local police found him hours after the assault. Matthew later died days later in a local hospital. The whole community, many who knew Matthew personally, and many who didn't expressed their horror and grief over what happened. As the media became increasingly involved, the whole nation also expressed its grief and outrage over what was a horrific hate crime, including President Bill Clinton who spoke about introducing hate crime legislation to express the nation's repugnance of crimes of intolerance.

Hate crimes are not just crimes of intolerance. They are crimes of social exclusion. And they are directly counter to the message of Jesus' gospel, which is one of social inclusion for all, from wherever and whatever background they come from, openly welcoming and accepting them into the loving community of God.

Over the past few years, one of the major themes I have spoken about, written about and preached about has been to promote social inclusion toward others – both those like us, and those not like us – into the community and table fellowship of Christ.

We've all witnessed over the past few years how religiously motivated hate crimes have wrought insane violence and needless carnage upon so many innocent lives because the perpetrators, for one reason or another, could not live with or tolerate others who were simply "not like them"...Crimes of ignorance and insane fears ... ISIS terror, gun crime at massive levels ... and crimes of violent social exclusion, condemnation and judgement.

Church is not innocent of perpetrating religiously-motivated hate crime throughout its two millennia of history and yet the message of Jesus, resounding strongly from the shadow of the cross, and from the pages of the Gospels, has and always will be, one of love and inclusion toward the socially-excluded and outcast including our 'enemies' without doing violence toward any to compel and coerce them to become "just like us". If we don't see that from what Jesus did and said in the Gospels, then we either haven't read or heard correctly, and we just haven't listened to what God is actually saying and doing through the person of Christ from the multitude of messages God has been speaking to us within the community of open table fellowship, open welcome and unconditional love toward all that we all claim to be part of. If that's the case, then we need to openly seek out the voice of Jesus about it and repent. Jesus wants us to include, welcome, and to love the excluded including finding ways to love our enemiessee his seminal teaching all about it in Matthew 5-7.

Lately I have been reading Richard Rohr & Mike Morrell's, *The Divine Dance – The Trinity And Your Transformation* (2016. SPCK, London). *The Divine Dance* is about the Trinity and describes how they relate to us, using the imagery of dance. It is all about relationship, and the Trinity is described in one part of the book as follows... "In the beginning was The Relationship." And collectively as the Bride of Christ, and individually as people of faith, we are included in The Relationship, as Rohr and Morrell describe us as the fourth person of the Trinity.

Now how can that be? And why, when we are often so different as human individuals from each other due to our backgrounds, why is that so? Well we all share the same original DNA due to us all being created by the same God. As such we, and all of creation, are from the same Word source (in the beginning was the Word and everything was created by that Word). And we were all, without exception, from the same Creator source. So in the beginning was Inclusion – none were left out. And that is still God's plan. That's why Jesus came and lived, died and was raised Among Us – to reverse the sin-originated exclusion of us. Jesus is the hope of the world, which involves its inclusion into the eternal future of creation as a transformed (recreated) and redeemed entity reoriented (repented) through faith and love toward God. God is not an annihilationist and is not going to utterly destroy the world but recreate it through transformational processes which include the inclusion of this world's unaccepted, the marginalised and the unwanted into God's future for Creation. That doesn't mean those people won't need to change but Love Makes The Way for that to happen. And love never fails.

Social inclusion is a major social justice theme within today's society. When has it ever not been? However, we as a creative arts movement are out of touch with that and with God, if we are not addressing it through our art in some way or other. Jesus, in so many texts like Luke 4, Matthew 25, is so proactively involved in including and welcoming the socially marginalised and excluded, and continually telling us to do likewise as his followers. How can our art exclude expression of that in some shape or form?

We need art to be speaking into, investigating and communicating about social justice issues. We need to be expressing prophetically-imaginative and alternative hope options to a world which is constantly on the brink of disaster due to things happening to it like hate-crimes. If we won't do that, and we remain silent while bad things happen to the world around us, we are also committing a crime – a sin of major omission. That sin is not our commission in mission. We need to be thinking as dance artists who we can support, and to be with Jesus in his social justice transformation mission which is stated so clearly in Luke 4 for us. I'm not going to quote it here. You need to read it for yourself!

Since November last year I have undertaken a Salvos [Salvation Army] chaplaincy course which I have almost fully completed. I am chaplain to an artist/pastor and his large team of artists/social activists who work among a poor community in Western Sydney. Particularly with public housing estate residents, among who they distribute food and other material assistance, as well a building civil community with them. Art plays a role. Compassion and social inclusion an even greater role in building the infrastructure for future trust, hope and better community.

I have observed an increase of interest from Christians in promoting social justice through the arts. Sadly, a lot of that has not become as evident from within the ICDF community nor is it where ICDF's main focus lies. That doesn't mean things have not happened to do with Art and Social Concern from within the ICDF community. It probably means that members are simply not communicating all that much about it among CDFs and ICDF.

As the Network Coordinator I want to stand down after a decade of doing this role, but I can't until someone takes my place. **Despite numerous invitations advising that this role is now open for a new leader to take over the running of the network, no one has come forward yet.** If you are interested, please notify the International Coordinators.

Grace and peace,
Andrew Park