

Reflection on “Innocent Bystander Inertia”: An Evangelical Ministry Case Study

There is a sick Christian ministry (of late) I worked with for four decades: as volunteer throughout; as line Staff for ten years; as Board member for six years; as Executive Director for 16 years; as founding Restorative Justice advocate under Mennonite Central Committee Canada for ten years.

Symptoms

Stage-setting symptoms are:

- A Board that operates and has operated for four years in a “power over” way contrary to the Board Manual it is to live by and uphold, contrary to the Gospel;
- A Board that operates contrary to the core values the agency claims: relationship building, cooperation, collaboration, consensus decision making, Restorative Justice and reconciliation/peacemaking, as partly contained in its very own name;
- A rejection of the contracted mediator’s recommendation two years ago that there be a full reconciliation process for Staff and Board so that the agency’s longstanding debilitating dysfunction identified by him be addressed and healed;
- A contractor who champions herself as a “Restorative Justice expert” but who displays opposite values and process in her repeated “power over” manoeuvres within the agency;
- An Interim Executive Director who collaborates with the Board that has rejected agency core values;
- An Executive Director for 16 years, recently retired, who has been “blowing the whistle” about Board intransigence and consequent agency dysfunction for four years; and is critiqued a lot for these actions.

Additional “Symptom”: Membership

The additional “symptom” is membership: about 140 strong. Under the provincial societies act, the Board is accountable to the membership. At a theological level, mutual collaborative accountability in this ministry is the picture drawn in Matthew 18. While a parachurch ministry is not a local church gathering, it is extension of multiple local church gatherings in ministry outreach. In Matthew 18, *the first principle of biblical ecclesiology is conflict resolution* through Christ’s presence promised to the “two or three gathered” to resolve conflict and produce the unity that tells the world about the Incarnation – according to John 17 – *and incidentally the only evangelistic “strategy” given by Christ in the Gospels.*

Why call membership dysfunction “symptom”? There is a story.

At the 2012 Annual General Meeting, and again at the 2013 Annual General Meeting, membership was made aware of serious agency conflict and dysfunction due to Staff/Board conflict. Central was a freshly minted **Board Manual in January 2010 that called for consensus decision-making as norm between Staff and Board in a “bottom-up” way of exercising power in the agency**, explicitly citing Jesus in his contrary-to-lording-it-over call of servanthood leadership (through basin-and-towel non top-down humility). Not consensus about the colour to paint the office (though we Staff would only proceed even there by consensus), but about all serious matters impacting Staff, Board, and agency well-being and direction. It was said to be the Jesus Way. Many international corporations operate thus; we were members for 21 years of a church fellowship that still operates thus. (“Consensus”, by the way, is not uniformity of opinion, rather uniformity of decision-making for the greater good of Gospel ministry because it is the counterintuitive Gospel Way.)

In June 2010 the new Board Chairperson rejected the Board Manual and attendant core values of cooperation, collaboration and respectful consensus decision-making. He frequently cited Robert’s Rules of Order and various pieces of provincial legislation in that rejection. The Executive Director on the contrary frequently

quoted Jesus and various pieces of servanthood peacemaking Scripture. The Board Chairperson never adduced Scripture. The Executive Director said the two were not necessarily contradictory. *But if “lording-it-over” decision-making was the new secular order for the M2/W2 Association, rather than respectful Gospel consensus decision-making by Board and Staff together as clearly spelled out in the Board Manual meant to serve as policy document for the Board, then the Executive Director would call the Board on it every time. He did.* (So did the mediator, by the way, when he intervened in 2012.)

Consequence of that persistent challenge was a Board move to “constructively dismiss” me in 2012. It was a classic instance in fact of constructive dismissal, and a pure “power over” two-part move by the Board (first halve my hours, then remove me as Executive Director). One 20-minute consultation *with*, one short letter *from*, a lawyer reversed permanently a series of Board lording-it-over moves in 2012 that sadly harmed Staff and agency morale enormously.

The related turmoil settled in to produce enduring debilitating agency dysfunction. I remained as Executive Director however until my choice to retire, end of March, 2014.

The day before retirement, I notified membership of three specific issues of serious conflict within the agency. I had raised these issues at the November 2013 Annual General Meeting, with less than a third of the membership present. I offered to membership that they could view a password-protected website with the back story and supporting documents. *(It is available indefinitely for members. Access information below.)*

The Board responded by calling for an Extraordinary General Meeting to respond to allegations. I replied by telling the story of my last official day in the office as Executive Director. On that day I was verbally harassed by the contractor for several minutes, despite my having said immediately upon her accosting me that I would not talk with that person (given previous experiences of harassment). I was subsequently locked out of the office by the contractor after I had left, then had returned to fetch a wallet. It was astounding, very sad – and deeply anti-Restorative Justice.

Observations About Membership as Symptom

Now some observations about membership as “symptom”:

1. Most persons do not want to hear about “injustice” any more than they are prepared to hear about a person’s crime victimization or loss of a loved one. (You the reader feel uncomfortable right now, possibly?...) After I shared about the continuing injustices at last year’s AGM, only one Staff person of all the members commented on it – and positively. The Board Chair however subsequently exulted that there was no immediate support response by the membership. He was right. However, when all 140 members were contacted in March 2014, several indicated support. But few asked for the website page password to read the back story. None of those supporters attended the EGM to speak up. Hardly any member spoke up on the issues that evening. This I call “*Innocent Bystander Inertia*”.
2. We hear of so much injustice in the world, there is understandably a weariness of response to such issues. When they come close to home, there is an “*Innocent Bystander Inertia*” dynamic about investigating further. Such was the experience at the EGM. No questions were asked by members about the “power over” structure of the evening. No questions of clarification were posed to me as the Board took control of the evening, along the lines of:
 - Is this a restorative process, Wayne?
 - Do you believe the Board has addressed your “whistle-blowing” issues, Wayne?
 - Are the accusations against you made that evening by the contractor and Board members valid, Wayne and Esther? (There was no forum of opportunity for mediated rejoinder. So we were dumped on without respectful response recourse. The entire EGM was tightly controlled by a Board member. Like the police controlling investigation into its wrongdoing.)

Only a few members have spoken with me since, including right after the EGM's conclusion. It is the human condition to embrace such *inertia*. Another word is *apathy*. It is the same phenomenon as citizen inertia during Germany's *Nazism*, during South African *apartheid*. Though the consequences were desperately life and death in those situations.

3. There was no overt antagonism from members encountered at the EGM except from the "usual suspects" of contractor, Interim Executive Director (sadly and afterwards¹), and Board members. It was rather unresponsive apathy and indifference, or as I call it, "*Innocent Bystander Inertia*". This too was and is symptom of wider agency dysfunction. **At its widest, it is the human condition, from which condition we are called to salvation.**

Morals of the Case Study

Morals of this reflection:

- The human condition is to routinely treat others, and to be treated by others *unjustly*.
- Kingdom of God reality is to transform those experiences into life-giving hope, one of three enduring qualities of "christiform"/"grain of the universe" living (see I Corinthians 13).
- Such alchemy is "second half of life" living as spiritual director [Richard Rohr](#) indicates, drawing on Carl Jung and above all Christian Scripture and Ancient Tradition.

It is determined actualization of forgiveness day by day, harm received by harm received. Otherwise, in Desmond Tutu's term, there is [No Future Without Forgiveness](#).

- Such "Case Study" however becomes one more instance of attempting to reaffirm, re-embrace and relive the Gospel. Nothing in that *case* is ever lost!

[NOTE for M2/W2 members:

There is a password-protected website page (<http://waynenorthey.com/611-2/>) under [Restorative Justice Links](#) on my website: [Wayne Northey | \(mostly\) my writings](#), that invites your interaction and participation. You are *still urgently* encouraged to contact me for the password. Click on "Contact me" on this website, or phone me: **(604)796-0400**. An Annual General Meeting is coming. I believe working through the material on that page can be a growing and learning experience for all connected to M2/W2 Association. *Would you at least accord me the dignity of checking the webpage out?]*

¹ On May 9, 2014, the Interim Executive Director and I met for the first time, after many times being invited to do so. His claim was that after the EGM, he had come over to shake my hand, not to refuse to talk with me. He indicated the latter April 17, but as of May 9 had changed tune. There was hopefulness in that.