

# So Shall Ye Reap

Coming out at the Harvest Crusade

By RICH KANE

**G**REG LAURIE IS CALLING TO ME, AND HE WANTS me bad.

I'm in Anaheim Stadium, site of the annual evangelical-Christian proselytizing fest known as the Harvest Crusade—you've seen the bumper stickers—and Laurie, the pastor who runs the show, is trying to persuade everyone in the crowd of 25,000 who hasn't accepted Jesus Christ as his or her savior to walk onto the outfield grass, gather in front of the makeshift altar he's preaching from, recite the Sinner's Prayer, and get saved.

I pass up the offer, unable to stomach Laurie's brand of Christianity-as-infomercial. "Act now!" he barks, pushing his concept of eternal life. "What a waste it would be if you let this opportunity slip by!"

Many take Laurie up on his request, though—small children, people in wheelchairs, the hearing-impaired, seniors barely able to walk. When they reach the field, a few are so overcome by salvation that they drop to their knees and raise their arms heavenward. You never see this level of euphoria at a typical Angels game.

As the exodus from the stands continues, Laurie grows more desperate to win over as many new converts as possible. "Everyone needs Jesus!" he thunders. Even the Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and Jews? "Jesus said, 'You're either for me or against me.'" It's a threat, a selective bit of Bible-thumping that casually ignores Mark 9:40 ("For he who is not against us is for us").

When the converts—numbering about 2,000—are assembled, Laurie leads them in the brief prayer. When it ends, everyone's sins are forgiven, and they're born again. The stadium erupts into a deafening cheer, and on the right-field scoreboard appears the message, "WELCOME TO THE FAMILY OF GOD!"

**M**Y RUN-INS WITH ORGANIZED RELIGION HAVE not gone well. I still have memories of catechism classes that kept me from watching cartoons after school, and of those awful communion wafers that tasted like decomposing Styrofoam.

My attitude didn't improve as I got older. For years, I equated religion with greasy televangelists who beg for "love gifts." I also learned just how intolerant and anti-everything the Catholicism I was raised in truly was.

The real-life encounters I had with God's subjects were equally ugly. There was the street-corner Holy Roller who berated a young mother to the point of tears for not being as Christian as he was—she had the nerve to work for a living instead of staying home to raise her kid. And there was the fiery-eyed gentleman I saw at a pro-choice rally who screamed into one woman's face, "If I didn't have Jesus in my heart, I'd knock the crap out of you, lady!"

So while I was unmoved by Laurie's salvation invitation, I was surprised to find myself strangely sympathetic to the Harvest Crusade flock. A year ago, I made an equally life-altering decision and joined a family quite different from Laurie's: I came out of the closet and started revealing that I was gay.

Let me witness.

The first person I told was my mom, who was completely unfazed. She was actually more shocked when I told her I had met my then-boyfriend through America Online. "Wow," she said. "Technology is so amazing!"

What I felt then—that peaceful, weight-lifted-off-the-shoulders, soul-cleansing sensation—was what many who came out as Christians at the Crusade also went through: rebirth, renewal and growth. I was born-again and became my true queer self.

Coming out also gave my life new meaning. In the case of the Harvesters, that translates into a lifelong devotion to Christ. For me, it means a commitment to gay activism and getting involved in issues that affect my newfound community.

**R**OD IS THE GUY WHO SAVED MY soul. His testimony convinced me that coming out would be an important thing to do. He grew up in a rock-solid religious Midwestern farm family, and though he had always known he was gay, he was taught—via the infamous Book of Leviticus—that homosexuality was an abomination. He therefore tried to con himself out of it, to the point that he nearly trapped himself in a straight marriage.

So intense was his anguish about what he had been taught and what he felt that he came close to killing himself. He even picked out the building he was going to jump off. Fortunately, he never had the balls to take that leap.

He instead did his best to suppress his gay feelings by throwing himself into school and church. One day, a teenage student in the Bible-study class Rod taught confided that he was gay and that he didn't know how to handle it.

Faced with this mirror image of himself, Rod told him to go pray on it.

But prayer didn't help. So a few days later, the student went out into a field, poured gasoline over himself, and struck a match. If Rod had been out back then, as he is now—and if his church had been progressive enough to let him be out—that kid might still be alive.

Which just proves what some religious types would rather ignore: sometimes people kill themselves not for lack of God but because of God. Or, more accurately, other people's interpretations of God.

Since then, Rod has vowed that he won't let anything that horrific happen again. Last year at the high school where he teaches, he came out to his classes, letting students who might be struggling with their sexuality know they had someone to talk to. Rod, who told me when we met that he was an atheist, said that afterward he felt God's presence for the first time in years.

Coming out does that, though it's still something gay men and lesbians must do at their own pace. There are few, if any, issues more personal and more difficult to discuss than whether you're AC or DC, which is why not all of my friends and family know yet about my born-again queerness. If they're reading this—surprise!

Sometimes it's easier to tell thousands of strangers your biggest secret than it is to tell those closest to you, just as it might be simpler for those new Christians to publicly proclaim their faith in a stadium full of anonymous souls than to a nonbeliever friend, perhaps out of a fear of being cast out as some sort of freak (a label



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often applied to both gays and Christians). At least on that level, our two groups have much in common.

Even though I sympathized with the Crusaders, I came away from the Harvest as agnostic as ever. I didn't feel any great impulse to get involved in organized religion. But if I ever do, I know there are gay-friendly denominations, like the Metropolitan Community Church, that will accept me as I am.

Most of my spiritual experiences still come from earthly sources—hanging out in Austin and New Orleans, breathing air that's free of car exhaust (a rare event in my La Habra neighborhood), and listening to Jimmie Dale Gilmore sing to me on my boom box late at night.

But some who made the trek down to that field undoubtedly need God, if only because they see no other way out. They need something to believe in, something bigger than themselves. If their new faith can help them kick a bad heroin habit, mend a busted relationship or inspire them to do something good, I'm down with them.

One difference between me and the hundreds who were born-again at the Crusade, though, is that for many of them, particularly those who will embrace the fundamentalist slant of their new religion, doing something good will involve working to get anti-gay measures passed, lobbying to deny me my equal—not special—rights, and doing whatever it takes to make sure I can never legally marry. To me, doing something good means busting my ass to stop them.

And the scary part is this: both of us are convinced that a higher power is on our side. ☐

COURTESY OF HARVEST CRUSADE