Nothing like luck would have it that an Irish pub was around the corner from the Scarlett Bennett Methodist Seminary in Nashville, where the leadership boards and councils from NACC, ACPE, APC and AAPC were meeting October 2-4, 1998. A few of us discovered the warmth of the darkened, wood-paneled pub with its busy chatter and bursting laughter shortly after our opening session concluded that first evening. Meeting new colleagues and renewing old friendships, five of us gathered at one of the tables adjoining the bar.

Readying to leave about an hour and a half later, the light, uplifting voice of a man turned our heads as he came from behind to our tables: "So I heard that you didn't think any of the waitstaff had a brogue," he said, with one as thick as a Guinness draft beer. We looked up to see this smiling, fair-skinned, blond young man addressing the five of us (apparently someone had mentioned, there were no real Irish in the Irish pub).

I smiled and ventured a stock response I have when I meet an Irish person, "Where in the Holy Land are you from?" "Belfast," he says, then quickly adds, "but I am a Catholic." I chuckle and say, "Be careful, there are three Protestants and two of us Catholics sitting here," pointing as I speak. He jumps in with, "I take no sides. That's why I am here and not in Philadelphia, New York, or Boston. There you have to take a side. Me mother and me brother were killed last month in a bombing. No, no sides."

A deadening silence. Nervously, and somewhat awkwardly, he points to me and says to the others, "Look at ye man here, he looks like he's gonna cry." He laughs, says a few other things, changing the subject quickly. Shortly thereafter he leaves our table as quickly and mysteriously as he came.

Breaking the quiet of the moment I turn and say, "I need to go see him." The others nod and we utter a few words expressing our astonishment over what we have just heard. One of the men stays with me as we move to the bar. I go out back, find the man, introduce myself and ask when he gets off work and if he would like to sit down and talk. "Yes," he says, "that would be good." He's off at 11:15 (a half hour from now) and so I tell him I will be waiting for him at the bar. I go back to my friend, who sits with me awhile until it gets close to my meeting time.

Michael, the young waiter, finally comes over and I buy him a pint of beer and suggest that we move outdoors to the garden where we might have some more privacy and can talk. As I begin to ask him what happened, the pain is visible in
his eyes. His strong Irish spirit keeps him moving ahead. After the funerals he decided he could not live there in that place of hatred any longer. This past month he came to Nashville, got a job, a room to live, and is coping by working seven days a week. He has no one left in his immediate family.

As he begins to talk slowly, he recounts the "worst of it" when he got the call to go down and claim their bodies. "I will never forget the steel and flesh all wound together." I sit there, reach out and place my hand on his shoulder, and say, "I am so sorry, Michael," over and over again.

Michael talks of a faith that they are in a better place. His religious belief means everything to him. His courage and bold spirit are apparent as he shares his background and his choices for the future. Already making a pastoral plan, I set a time to meet two nights later.

I walk into the pub and he sees me first and from the end of the bar he yells, "Father Joe," and jumps off the stool and comes down to me and gives me a big hug. "I thought you might not be coming," he said. "No, Michael, when I say I'll be there, I will be there."

We talk for a few hours that night and I meet his "girlfriend" and am touched at the obvious mutual attraction of this budding love of youth, and particularly, the charm of this smart and witty Irishman. By now, we have talked about the need to do his grief work with someone professional. He agrees and I tell him that I will come with a name and a phone number the next night as well as my own address and phone number.

Michael is there the next night and we spend more time talking, and I leave off all the names and addresses the following day.

In the week that has passed since that meeting in Nashville, I have given much thought to that event and to the reaction to my colleagues as I recounted to them the story of meeting this young man. I found that what was happening with us, the pastoral caregivers, was a "natural" group theological reflection. People were touched and would ask how the second or third night went. One woman reflected on the "Providence" of God; a care that God has for us in a meeting that happens at the right time in the right space with the right response.

Another person reflected on how the minister is always a minister no matter where he or she is. In that person's words, "you don't take off your ministry, and put it back on at a set time of day."

The way the allusion to the bombing "fell out," said another, demonstrated how deeply his unconscious self was seeking healing.

Last Spring, speaking at the Harvard course, Spirituality and Healing in Medicine, I was asked a question by a physician, obviously of a fundamentalist
which then creates healthier communities?

background, "Isn't part of my duty as a Christian to evangelize and tell people that Jesus was their Lord and Savior?" I paused and reflected back to the questioner my own theology of evangelization. Yes, we are called to share the "good news," but for me, that means not telling people about Jesus, but rather witnessing to Jesus so that they have their own question, what moves this man (woman) to live the life he or she lives? Isn't that the early kerygma, witnessing rather than teaching (or telling?) That theology is summed up in that song, "They will know we are Christians by our love."

That incident came back to me when the second night at my Irish pub "parish," another young man approached me. "You're Father Joe, right? Michael told me about you. Can I talk to you for a minute?" And his story came out.

I know my sinfulness and shadows better than almost everybody else. I don't always witness to Jesus nor live life worthy of being his witness. In fact, there are many things I have done, do and will do, despite my best efforts, that I would want hidden from the eyes of others.

But I share this story for two reasons. First, I am again amazed at the power of the moment if only I have, to use the evangelist John's favorite metaphor, "the eyes to see." A daily prayer perhaps for all of us: "Lord, help me to see who it is you will have along the same road with me today. Help me to lift my head and recognize you there as surely as I would if gathered in a room for "the breaking of the Bread."

My second reason for sharing this story is to raise the question, "What does it mean to move outside the walls of our traditional institutions for the wellness of persons which then creates healthier communities?" Does it mean just the doctor's offices? Does it mean just the clinics and outpatient settings? Does it mean just the parishes and community centers? Does it mean just the schools?

How far do we want to move outside the walls? What about spiritual care in the bars and pubs of this country? Who among us has not heard that the bartender probably hears more confessions and secrets of people than do all the religious ministers? What if, for example, a hospital-parish partnership decided to seek funding for a chaplain for the bars? What kind of strategy would be for this chaplain to call a meeting of the bartenders, explain what spiritual care services are available, give out printed cards for reference, and alert the bartender to the kind of situations where our service could be helpful?

Every person has a story and every person has dis-ease. Some hurt more than others, and a simple intervention can go a long way for the individual and also for the community in which the person lives. If we are serious about "healthy communities," then we have to explore "outside the walls" and decide how far we are going to go outside.
Related to this question is mission. What incentive would any health care/parish partner have to reach this far? Certainly it would not be a traditional source of revenue (without some creativity), but what in our mission statements would push the wall further and further back.

Interestingly enough, Michael did go to a parish priest early on, but unfortunately got the "pious" answers of heaven, needing to move on with your life, etc. Health is not always found in our parishes, nor in our parish staffs.

Michael is turning 30 this month. If there was one thing that unnerved me, it was the question of who is going to send him a birthday card? Who does he have in this world? If no other thing, I made sure I got his birth date.

And this man Michael has plenty of resources within himself; what about so many of our people -- God's people -- who have so little health or so much disease of body, mind and spirit? The poorest of the poor who lay beneath the walls out of our sight and out of our reach. Do we even need walls in comprehensive healthcare for the community?

Nothing but grace would have it that there was an Irish pub around the corner from Scarlett Bennett Methodist seminary the first weekend in October in the year of our Lord, 1998.

No, not luck, grace.