

MINISTRY ON THE EDGES

By EDWINA GATELEY

BEING WOMAN, Catholic and lay, it is perhaps not surprising that I have always felt somewhat on the edges myself. All my life ministry has been central, but I never quite fitted into or qualified for the kinds of traditional ministries that the Church offered. This was once a source of great grief for me. I wanted to do so much in the Church, but could not fit in or be fitted into. I often thought of the scriptural image of the new cloth sewn on to the old—and the new wine being put into the old bottles—and I was comforted.

God, I believe, taps all our resources and experience in calling us not only to continued personal growth, but also to a deeper awareness of our on-going journey in mission. For ten years I worked in England as the founder-director of the Volunteer Missionary Movement. When the VMM began, it was only a ministry on the edges, because we were a whole new thing in the Roman Catholic community—men and women, married and single, working as Roman Catholic missionaries in the Third World and setting up new small communities in Britain and Ireland. We were different and challenging and caused not a few ripples in Church circles. This lay movement has grown and grown and achieved a distinct credibility and validity through hard struggle. For me, I felt it was time to move on. I sense danger when one begins to get comfortable in ministry and I had a feeling that, much as I loved my role, God was calling me away—or as Hosea would have put it: ‘I am going to love her and lead her out into the wilderness and speak to her heart’ (Hos 2,16).

The wilderness, in my particular case, turned out to be Chicago, USA. For two years I studied theology and then spent a third year living in a forest, trying to discern where God would have me next. I fondly imagined myself back in the heart of things, maybe leading formation courses for lay ministers in England, perhaps giving retreats and conferences, even writing a book on lay ministry. Alas! God had different ideas. Completing my year in the

hermitage with a thirty-day retreat, I gradually became painfully aware that God, far from calling me to the 'heart' of action, was calling me to the edges! Suddenly I was assailed by images of streets, alleys, brothels, bars, prostitutes, street people. When I tried to shake the intrusive images away, I experienced a sense of God's compassion crying out for the people to be healed and comforted. It was all unfamiliar and rather frightening territory for me. I could hardly understand what prostitutes and brothels had to do with ministry and mission—but as I prayed and reflected, it became vividly clear that I must minister on the edges to those most edged out of our society and, indeed, our Church.

I did not relish the prospect. I felt I had no credentials, no experience. How does one begin? Where does one begin? How will I live? The questions were disturbing. The fact that there were no answers was doubly disturbing. I felt angry with God and had a little insight into the protests and lamentations of the prophets: Isaiah, who said he was not good enough; Jeremiah, who claimed he did not know what to say; Amos, who wanted to do his own thing as a shepherd. We do not easily find ourselves in ministry on the edges.

Ultimately, I simply had to trust. I moved into the inner city and rented a room in an area known as 'the dumping ground' for Chicago's homeless, street walkers, refugees, winos, unemployed and so on. I felt totally out of place and distinctly uncomfortable. My first tentative ventures out into the dirty streets—littered with broken bottles, papers and a vast assortment of rubbish—were quite harrowing. I did not know the area. I kept getting lost. Drunks yelled and jeered at me from dark tavern doors. Black men propositioned me. Bag ladies and others, slumped in despair on street corners, ignored me. There was no blueprint for this kind of ministry. No one, it seemed, had gone before me and got it worked out and nicely organized. I was thrown by God's grace into a new and frightening world with a vague sense that I was to be about some kind of mission.

I thought of how Paul must have felt when he was thrown from his horse to stumble blindly and bewilderedly in a 'new' world—and of Zechariah, when, struck dumb, he was at the same time aware that he had to fulfil God's call to bring about a new thing. Blind and dumb, in many ways, I walked the streets and alleys of Chicago. I crept into darkened bars and sat among strange people who were moving about in the shadows, laughing and shouting

against a background of very loud music. One such night, a middle aged lady climbed on to the bar stool next to me. From a large plastic bag, she produced a loaf of sliced bread and a tin of tuna fish and asked me if I would join her to eat. I agreed, and she dug her hands into the tin of fish and slapped lumps of it on to two dry slices of bread and offered it to me with a smile. I remembered Eucharist. In between the sandwiches and beer, she proceeded to tell me her life story. She was a prostitute, a little past her best, but still at it. She wound up her pain-filled life struggle with a despairing invitation to me to team up with her. Clearly, my being in that bar at that particular time indicated that I too was a prostitute. Gently, I told her I was a minister. She crumpled up and sobbed and sobbed on my shoulder. It was my first intimate contact with a street woman. I left the bar shaken with an enormous sense of helplessness.

My long walks on the streets became my training ground for ministry on the edges. There were no books on how to minister to prostitutes and street people. I would have to learn from mistakes and experience. God somehow managed to propel me into the most unlikely places for a disciple of Jesus to be. My first tentative overtures to three prostitutes, standing on a dimly lit street corner, were quickly and profoundly rejected with a flat 'f.... off'. It was a disappointing beginning. What do you do, when your (hopefully) potential 'congregation' tells you to 'f.... off'? Dejected and bewildered, I crept to my rented room to lick my ministerial bruises. I wished I had a guide book. Next night I went back and was greeted with more language that should not be printed. But curiosity got the better of the ladies that night. In their own colourful way, they asked me who I was and what I was doing on their turf. My English accent fascinated them. That was a good start. They accused me of being a cop, a reporter, a psychologist and finally a nun, none of which I was. So I told them I did not know what I was doing there, apart from wanting to make friends. It was then that the women responded positively. It was then, when they were convinced that I had no credentials and no agenda, that they were prepared to accept me.

The importance of being open and helpless was one of my first lessons in effective ministry on the edges. I came to understand that these people on the edges do not take happily to being rescued, cared for, helped or however you want to put it. For them, whether we like it or not, we represent the 'straight', white (usually)

establishment. We represent the ones who have made it, the educated and 'got-together' elite. Often, the greatest humiliation they might suffer is our benevolence. However, in this particular case, I had no resources to be benevolent! I was the alien—the stranger—the lost one. I did not know what I was about. I was dependent upon their welcoming me and leading me. Who else would show me the world of the prostitute and the homeless, but the prostitutes and the homeless?

So it was those to whom I had been sent to minister, who began to lead and teach me. They introduced me to one of Chicago's brothels, where, at the somewhat reluctant invitation of the Madame, I went to visit. There I sat amongst the hookers, while the men—all dressed in smart business suits, came in and out, picking a woman and handing over their money. I was confused, embarrassed, even guilty. What was I, a disciple of Jesus, doing in a brothel? What should I say? There were so many questions. There were no answers. I experienced one wave of emotion after another—anger at the men and their respectability, helplessness before the blatant abuse and pain, sadness at the obvious misery of the women. I felt myself in a moral dilemma. Was I condoning prostitution by being there? Was I breaking the law even by being in an illegal place? Again, lots of questions—no answers. I tried to imagine what Jesus would do . . . how Jesus would be present. I remembered the gospel story of the woman caught in adultery and how Jesus challenged the 'respectable' onlookers to cast the first stone. So I sat and said nothing.

Every week I went to the brothel and sat. I watched the men come in; I observed some of the pain and the despair of the women. Almost all of them had an addiction—alcohol or drugs. 'We can't do it if we're sober' was a common expression. The closer I got to the women, the more my pre-conceived ideas and conditioning about prostitutes were shattered. Portrayed as hostile, grasping and aggressive to the public, the women I sat with began to reveal other sides of themselves. Sometimes they cried as they shared their stories of abuse and pain. Often, when they thought no one was watching, their faces were etched in misery and loneliness. Through my encounters with women in the brothel, on the streets and in the bars, there began to emerge a profile of the average prostitute: almost all had been victims of incest and abuse as children—some from infancy. Because of their disturbed

backgrounds, most had not completed school and had poor education; all had some form of criminal record through prostitution and had started walking the streets as teenagers. The profile was frightening. These women had never stood a chance. From the word go, they had been abused. It was not surprising they did not have any self-esteem to get themselves out of their abusive life-styles.

It became clear to me that nobody cared about the 'hookers'. No one seemed to think they were lovable people, or that there was any hope for them at all. And the women themselves knew it. They were very much aware that they were the 'bottom of the pile', 'the sinners', 'the scum of the earth' (as one prostitute, in tears, described herself). I became aware that it was very important to be with these women, to be with their pain and their isolation. Words were totally inadequate, advice seemed trite over against their awful loneliness. Nothing I could say or do seemed appropriate. It was all too deep, too big, too painful for me. But I sensed that God was very much present—that somehow just being there was important and that God somehow needed my presence as a link, a contact of grace, to touch the women. One day I was greatly encouraged by something the Madame said: 'It seems different when you're here'. Well, maybe that is all we can expect with ministry on the edges—'It seems different'. There are no clear results, no productions, no goals or successes—just being there, exposing one's self to the pain and suffering of the people at the edges of our society. I felt that in doing that, I somehow was able to absorb some of their pain. Maybe that made the difference. I do know that I began to experience myself as a more compassionate woman. I remembered how Jesus had gone amongst the people, doing a lot of touching involving healing: 'He went to her (Simon's mother-in-law) and took her by the hand' (Mk 1,31). 'He put his fingers into the man's ears and touched his tongue with spit' (Mk 7,3). 'And all those who touched him were cured' (Mk 6,56).

Often, I think, we professional ministers are afraid of touching or intimacy. But my experience on the streets has taught me that physical contact with people is very important in the healing process. The prostitutes were hungry for real caring, gentle touching and a genuine hug. Once they trusted and accepted me, they loved to be held—and often wept in the embrace. These women had never been cared for before, had never been nurtured, never

been held in pure affection and friendship. Ministry at the edges demanded a great deal of hugging. I lamented our inexperience. Being in the brothel made me deeply aware of the injustice of the criminal system, which punishes the women, but does not penalize the men. Such awareness becomes painful. I wrote one day in my journal:

God in the brothel

I went to the brothel
and took God with me.
The Madame cursed and spat
fury and hatred, spewing it out
all over the kitchen
and all over God.
The women sat listless
in dreadful despair
waiting for the customers
with their dirty minds
and cold, cold lust.
The men, furtive and awkward
in the smart business suits
but itching to rape
and to devour
before driving home
to the wife and kids
and barbecue on the lawn.
I went to the brothel
and took God with me
and through all the sickness,
the sin and the stink
God sat—trembling
in stunned and dreadful silence.

Ministry at the edges is hard, very hard. It has taken me a few years to learn that I can heal or cure no one—that only God has the power to transform and bring forth new life. All I can do is be present, absorb some of the pain—so that hopefully, I might be a little transformed and pray that God will touch other lives through me. But I have learned that it rarely happens in the way I hope or expect. One of the first women I met on the streets was a prostitute, a drug addict and alcoholic street woman, by the name of 'Teddy Bear'. She was only twenty-seven and had lived on the streets about seven years. Like almost all the other street

women, she had come from an abusive home. In my ministerial zeal I was determined to 'help' Teddy Bear. Deep down I felt I could be some kind of guardian angel to this woman whom no one wanted. So, I set to with enthusiasm. I got to know her well; met up with her on street corners; bought her clothes, food and the occasional treat. After some months, I got her a room in the same building where I lived and began to encourage her to go on an alcoholic treatment programme. Teddy Bear eventually agreed and went into a six-week residential programme. I was elated, proud. Three days after completing the programme, Teddy Bear went off to the streets, leaving behind her little room filled with congratulation cards, flowers and gifts. Two days later I found Teddy Bear drunk and bleeding in the gutter. Where now was God's presence—God's spirit rising in the poor and marginated? She stank. She sobbed. She lurched. 'Why, why?' I demanded furiously (and naively). She looked at me intently and said a few words I would never forget: 'I ain't never been loved before. I can't take it'. I winced. I felt God within me—compassionate, ever caring, ever loving.

Teddy Bear came home with me. We started again. My hopes for a new life for her were high again, until she slipped away to more gutters and more degradation.

One day I found her lying sobbing and dirty on her bed after a week on the streets. After she fell into an erratic sleep, I discovered a note she had left in my room: 'I know you are disappointed in me. Please understand. It's been rough for me. I messed things up. I feel really bad. But I want to live. Please understand again. Don't let me go. Don't give up on me. You're all I got. Don't give up'.

I felt I was being stretched to the absolute limits. That night I prayed in my despair and recorded in my journal the words I heard in my heart:

Even at the gates of hell believe in redemption

Let my grace and power work

Where you have none.

It is only for you to believe and trust

Be confident. Trust. Love. Do not condemn.

Believe in the face of unbelief

Hope against hope

This is faith.

This is the gift most needed for those who have

suffered so deeply and lost all.

You must manifest love and hope. It is
the only way they will begin to believe in it
for themselves.

After a year, and more than a dozen drunken, destructive escapades later Teddy Bear at last went to a residential treatment programme for chemical dependency. Now I knew all would be well! She completed the programme and we celebrated with gifts and a party.

Within a week my hopes and dreams were shattered. Teddy Bear went off again. She shackled up in a run-down hotel with a black pimp who broke her ankle with a baseball bat. I went to visit her. It was a tiny, cockroach-infested room with nothing but an old bed covered with dirty stained sheets, a blaring black and white television set and an assortment of spilling-over ash trays and empty beer cans. Teddy Bear was lying, dirty, smelly, unkempt and crying on the bed, her ankle a bleeding swollen mess. 'I love you', I said. 'I love you too', she said, the tears running down and soaking her hair. There was nothing more to say. But in my guts, I felt God's presence—loving, caring, all compassionate! 'Let it be. Let it be. . .' And somehow I knew, without a doubt, that God was there—breaking down and smashing the barriers and stereotypes, loving with an almighty passion where we are too afraid or disgusted or tired to love, touching where we are appalled to touch. God—all compassionate, crucified, broken, rejected—screaming 'Love me!' And I did. But, oh how it hurt! I was torn apart with grief. I loved her.

For another two years, Teddy Bear was central in my life—coming home, leaving, picking up, destroying. And I stood with her; feeling all the anguish and the deep despair which is part of watching someone you love kill themselves. I wrote in my journal:

This ministry brings one face to face with death and suicide by people so hurt and wounded and abused that it seems that they are beyond help. I must just keep going, believing against all odds, hoping against all hope. I have seen no joy today and seen no hope today. But I have experienced a little faith.

One winter night Teddy Bear, at the age of thirty, died alone and in agony in a dirty hotel room. She had left a message for

me to call her. But I was angry and frustrated with her behaviour, so I did not call. At 3.00 a.m. that morning the telephone rang, 'Teddy Bear is dead'. I did not feel the tender compassionate God within me. I felt a terrible, stunning emptiness.

A week later we held a funeral service for Teddy Bear. The funeral parlour was packed with street people—bag ladies, prostitutes, winos, homeless, pimps and drug pushers. They sat side by side with priests and nuns, middle-class Christians from the suburbs (who had known of my work with Teddy Bear) and even a reporter from *Newsweek*. The tears flowed in that chapel—priests, prostitutes, ministers and winos sobbed alike for the dead Teddy Bear. One of the street people, shaking and weeping, came and placed a single rose on her coffin. Teddy Bear had brought black and white, the lion and the lamb, the rich and the poor together.

The God within all of us stirred and clasped us as one—united in our strange, confused love and grief for this thirty-year-old woman who lived such a life of misery and degradation, who, within it all, had learned to laugh and live a little, and who somehow managed to touch so many of us so deeply enough to experience God, to bring us all together in our brokenness.

My experience with Teddy Bear taught me, more than anything else, that the ministry on the edges is one where we receive and learn more than we are ever able to teach or to do; but also that, amongst all the pain and poverty, we must hold on to a fragile, burning hope that somehow, somewhere, sometime, there will be a new life—probably where we least expect it.

In January 1984, I opened a house of hospitality and nurturing for prostitutes in Chicago. It is called Genesis House—meaning hope and a new life from brokenness and chaos. Now the women have a place to go where they can feel safe and welcome, where they can pick up the tattered broken threads of their lives and start again. Many do not make it. As one of them wrote, 'I feel so low down in the ground, I can't get up again. I wish I were dead'. But some do make it, and through the long journey of healing and nurturing, we see hope and the first shoots of new life breaking through. 'You have given me new hope for a new life. I can't believe there is really someone who understands. I thought I was all alone and I wanted to kill myself. But now, I know I am not alone and I know I can make it because somebody believes in me . . .'

In ministering to the people on the edges, I have been ministered to. They have taught me how to go to the depths and rise to the heights; they have revealed to me degrees of pain and sadness I hardly knew existed and they have led me to a deeper awareness of a God who loves his people intensely enough to cry out in passionate longing:

They will come and shout for joy on the heights of Zion,
They will throng forward to the good things of Yahweh . . .
Their souls will be like a watered garden.
They will sorrow no more.
I will change their mourning into gladness,
Comfort them, give them joy . . .

(Jer 31,12.13)