

DRAWING ON GOD'S LOVE TO MINISTER AT THE MARGINS

The word “margin” comes from the Latin word *margo* meaning edge, perimeter, fringe or periphery. It is a word that Pope Francis uses often in his writings and sermons. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis forcefully states that the church must move from her comfort zone in order to reach all people, especially those in the peripheries in need of the light and the mercy they long for, and where the hearts of those ministering also are converted and transformed.



BRIAN SMITH

He writes, “The word of God constantly shows us how God challenges those who believe in him ‘to go forth’. Abraham received the call to set out for a new land (Gen 12:1-3). Moses heard God’s call: “Go, I send you” (Ex 3:10) and led the people towards the promised land (Ex 3:17). To Jeremiah God says: ‘To all whom I send you,

you shall go’ (Jer 1:7). In our day Jesus’ command to ‘go and make disciples’ echoes in the changing scenarios and ever new challenges to the church’s mission of evangelization, and all of us are called to take part in this new missionary ‘going forth’. Each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out, but all of us are asked to obey his call to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the ‘peripheries’ in need of the light of the Gospel.”¹

This issue of *Health Progress* focuses on youth at risk — individuals and groups of individuals that often go unnoticed, which of course makes them some of the very people on the fringe that Pope Francis wants us to go out to encounter.

In my 30-plus years of ministry, I have had the privilege of ministering to many at-risk children, teens and young adults as they try to discover the light and mercy of God in their lives. As a clinical psychologist working in special education, I worked with children and teens who have learning disabilities. Many of them were also dealing with anxiety and depression. As a pastor and counselor, I worked with family dysfunction and

the physical, psychological and spiritual toll this takes on the children. As a teacher and youth minister, I dealt with the impact and effects of bullying and peer pressure. Sometimes I worked with teens and families experiencing an unplanned pregnancy, rape or sexual abuse.

I have ministered to teens and young adults who are trying to integrate their same sex attraction or gender dysphoria in a healthy, life-giving manner. There also have been young people so deeply at risk that I needed to refer them to others because they were dealing with substance abuse, needed to be medically treated for clinical depression or suicidal ideation. I have been blessed to encounter youth, journey with them and mutually experience God’s grace.

What I have learned from these experiences is that leaving my comfort zone and going to the margins is only difficult if I see myself as different than those who are experiencing some type of pain or alienation. But if I remember that I too have had my moments of darkness and pain, and that it is God’s love and mercy that brings me to a place of healing and grace — then I know that I am entering into the encounter not as one who is better, but as a fellow sojourner desiring to share the Good News I have received.

Early in my pastoral ministry I was counseling a young man who had grown up in a physically and emotionally abusive household. He was medicating his low self-esteem with drugs and alcohol. He had been kicked out of his parents’ house, had a hard time keeping a job and was one step away from being homeless. When I tried to use my clinical psychology and counseling skills to inter-

vene, he would leave. One day, I shared the story of a period in my life when I did not love myself, pushed people away and felt as if there was no hope. I went on a retreat and experienced God's presence and love in a way I had never felt before. I knew I was loved and accepted by God and that nothing about me was a mistake. I told him it was that experience of coming from darkness into light that had led me to want to serve God and God's people. I wanted others to experience this same gift of God's love.

In that moment when I stopped being the "expert" and spoke to this young man as someone who also knew brokenness, the dynamic changed. A trust began to develop, and our sessions were no longer framed as healer speaking to the one needing healing. They became moments of grace as we shared our mutual journey and how to find God, especially during periods of darkness.

There is something within youth that recognizes when people are being genuine and real with them. They also know when adults are being fake, insincere and manipulative. They can relate to others who are vulnerable, willing to enter into mystery and not supply all the answers. If there is one thing ministering to youth has taught me, it is when I share my experience of God's grace found through my weakness, they are willing to open up about their own vulnerability. The encounter is then a relationship — people mutually learning from one another and celebrating the healing grace of God discovered in the process.

There is a well-known story of the encounter between Saint Francis of Assisi and a leper that illustrates this point. The story recounts how Francis heard a bell announcing the coming of a leper, and he intuitively turned in the opposite direction to get away. Lepers were outcasts, living beyond the margins of society, unable to enjoy any benefit from the community. However, Francis suddenly stopped and turned around. He approached the leper, embraced him and kissed him. Saint Francis did not cure the leper, but rather it was the leper who cured Francis. After this encounter, the leper remained a leper, but Francis was healed of his

vanity and fear. An encounter that occurred in the periphery of society transformed Francis forever, because at that moment he was able to encounter the leper as another human being — his brother. This is precisely what Pope Francis means by "... the hearts of those ministering are also converted and transformed."²

Applying this lesson to Catholic health care's outreach to youth at the margins suggests we approach this vulnerable population remembering

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that we as individuals and institutions are always in need of healing. We do not go to the margins presuming we are the healers with all the answers. We go to the fringes and peripheries humbly acknowledging we do not hold all the answers and that we also are searching for healing and mercy. In this sacred encounter, the children of God journey together — all in need of healing, and all healers.

Pope Francis reminds us, "The credibility of the Church and the Christian message rests entirely on how Christians serve those marginalized by society ... We will not find the Lord unless we truly accept the marginalized! Truly, the Gospel of the marginalized is where our credibility is at stake, is found and is revealed."³

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NOTES

1. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel), para. 20.
2. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*.
3. Francis, Homily to New Cardinals, Feb. 14, 2015.

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