

Margins

Margins, Fences, and Supervision by Mary Farrell

*"I have always preferred being on the margin because it gives a perspective which allows us to judge, imagine, love, live within the moment and outside it, free, but with the freedom of a slave who dreams of it."*¹

This morning one of my supervisory tasks involved a very interesting telephone conversation with a woman I had never met. This is a woman whose family have grown up and left home. She is the wife of a Protestant minister and has always had a special interest in the pastoral needs of his parish. In recent years she has returned to study and has completed an arts degree. My new friend is, at present, completing a Ministry degree and it had been recommended at her College that she talk to me. This woman wanted to know what I had to offer her as a Clinical Pastoral Education supervisor. What indeed! She spoke with some longing of those people who are considered to be unchurched, un-Christian and even unsaved and who are hurting and needing and somehow not considered to be the responsibility of the church. Her own opinion is that the best way to reach some of these people is for good people to take the risk of going outside one's church or, in her words to "move over," in the sense of going over to the other side, in order to provide a secular service where the cry of the poor could be heard and prisoners would be set free. The "other side" is somewhere outside the church. Is there a law in place forbidding such a venture?

I was amazed and strangely excited at the wisdom and the insight of this woman. Maybe this was because she was reaching into some of what I have been doing through my supervision at INSTEP (IN Service Training and Education for People) during the past twelve years. Maybe it was because what she was saying was echoing some of what I have written and published, especially in describing my programmes as community based, all-inclusive and pushing out some of the safe and well tested boundaries. Why would a member of such a conservative church as my friend on the phone, come to conclusions so closely related to some of my own more radical ventures? Why would she be now determined to find a way to follow these conclusions to a practical solution? What would I have to offer her?

Velting, who uses the margin of a book as the symbol to represent his place in the church has something to say to this:

*"Rather than seeing marginal space as a typically narrow, withdrawn, alienated space, we need to allow the margins to breathe, to be the very life and breath of the book."*²

Is there such a thing as a vocation which calls one to leave the "church," to "become intentionally marginal rather than peripherally marginal," so that others may experience the saving grace of God? I have found many people in my supervision who have come from a situation of alienation and one of their tasks while doing INSTEP was to find their "resting place" within the church. I speak of church in its very broadest context as being the place where my students find a place in which they may practise their supervised ministry. The story of the journey of INSTEP and my own journey in supervision has paralleled the journey of many of our students.

Certainly Mother Teresa was called to leave her Religious Order so that she could work exclusively for the dying and the poor. She did, however, remain very much within the church and her work could be seen to be the work of the church. She sought the approval of the Pope for what she wanted to do and she remained a Religious by founding a new Order. What Mother Teresa did was to move the fences, or change the rules so that Gospel values would be the driving force of what she wanted to do. My own position of living within a Churches of Christ community (while remaining a Sister of Mercy belonging to our community at Lilydale) in order to respond to where I have been called in my supervisory journey is not unlike the journey of many of the prophetic trail blazers of the Christian story. This enables me to encourage my students to follow where they believe God is calling them.

A story has been told of a Quaker who worked in Poland after the First World War, distributing food and clothing to an impoverished people. When he suddenly died of typhus there was nowhere to bury him. All of the Polish cemeteries were Catholic and the Catholic Church did not allow anyone who was not a Catholic to be buried in consecrated ground. There was a law in place. So he was buried outside the fence of the cemetery. In the morning it was found that the lay people in the parish had moved the cemetery fence so that it now included the grave of their friend. In my case it was the staff of the Churches of Christ Theological College who moved the fences so that I, a Catholic Sister of Mercy and a CPE supervisor, could be included within their faculty and community. In working with students as they set their goals for INSTEP I challenge them to push out their boundaries, to find some new and untried ways of operating in their ministry.

In January 1998 INSTEP moved to the campus of the Churches of Christ Theological College in Mulgrave. When it was suggested that I, a Roman Catholic nun reside on campus at CCTC there seemed to be some very high fences to be scaled. Perhaps the one that symbolised all others was that I had a dog and pets had always been forbidden in the units on the campus. There was a law in place. This was my way out, I would not have to climb fences, and I would rent a house down the street. The faculty had other ideas. They moved the fences, both literally and figuratively, so that I (and Bill) would be inside the community. There were still fences to be scaled or moved or removed but we have quietly become a very hospitable and welcoming community for the nun and the animal and all comers! We accept and respect our differences and celebrate our common humanity and Christianity. On looking back, this was a natural next step for INSTEP and its programmes. This experience of mine reflects the group operations I encourage in our programmes, offering hospitality and inclusion to all cultures and religions.

One of my students, a Catholic priest, recently remarked to me that I am a strong witness within the church by living within a protestant community. My response was that maybe I do witness to some of my strongest beliefs about

community and ecumenism but that I believe that it is the people of this protestant community who are truly the ones who bear witness to what the church ought to be.

One of the most formidable fences that Christians have made since the church began is “the law.” In the early church, laws about food and circumcision and similar issues were real obstacles to unity. As quickly as the fences round these laws were removed more would be put in place. This has been the history of the church, religious orders and other church-run institutions. Over the centuries the various factions within the Christian church have promulgated laws, which have built fences designed to keep the others excluded – even from salvation! One of the tasks included in my supervision of people in ministry training is directed at recognising and removing those fences that separate and exclude under the guise of law. Laws, which are purportedly in place to prevent abuse, can in themselves be abusive in that they tolerate and even encourage abuse. We can be too handy at making heavy bundles for people’s backs. These loads only make the fences look and feel higher and more forbidding.

Another of my tasks in working with students in training for pastoral ministry is to challenge them to be fully integrated as people and so to be ready to take their place as people of the world. I would hope that such a supervisory stance would help to produce people in the church who would have some influence in the promulgating of just laws and the removal of unjust laws. I have felt rewarded to read letters in the papers from past students challenging the government and other authorities to pay attention to the real issues within our world. One such person has a ministry in aged care and has been advocating for better conditions in our aged care facilities. Another student working in Collingwood pointed out to the Government the real dangers of drug pushing, which he was meeting in his ministry on the streets. Yet another student, a Koori working in a public hospital had a Koori patient moved so that he would be near a window. There, the patient was not so oppressed by the feeling of being hemmed in. This is a situation which can lead to suicide for a Koori.

I am indebted to my colleague and friend Charles Bayer for the following:

“During four plus years here (in Australia) I have noted an increased insularity among both students and others. Many often seem ghetto-ised in the ecclesial institution, as if it began and ended their world. Their daily activities, relationships and ethos are all caught up in the church. They have little else to talk about, think about and associate with. Many seem unaware that there is a rather large, complex, interesting world out there. What is more, the terms ‘ecumenics’ or ‘ecumenical’ have often been reduced to interchurch communication, or at best the unity of the church. But that is only one step from the previously mentioned sectarian ghetto-isation. The word does not refer to the whole church, but to the whole world, “the whole household.” It is not the unity of the church but the unity of the world, which is the goal of God’s salvific work in history. Your suggested program has the possibilities of moving even beyond inter-faith dialogue to an encounter with the wider world.”³

My delight was to find that this esteemed theologian was thinking along the same lines as myself and I felt very encouraged by this discovery. I do have something to offer. Yes, I am beginning to find an answer to my question, what do I have to offer someone who sees the only authentic way to serve God in the world as ‘moving over’ or moving fences and daring to take some risks for the sake of the Gospel. This is a very scary business. Fences are necessary for security, protection and safety as well as for isolation and exclusion.

Some fences need to be retained, even if moved, in order to protect identity and the sense of belonging. We need boundaries. We need to have boundaries that are recognised and respected by others. However, we are far too careful and too exclusive. We seek to look good as a church or as an association. We want to look the biggest and the best or the chummiest and the most tightly knit or the most Christ-like as well as the most unworldly. Always the best.

Some of the risks I have taken in my supervision have been to take into my programmes some students who are non-Christian, some who work in a secular environment, some who have had to struggle with cultural problems related to language and customs and others who have been considered to be no-hopers in their other fields of endeavour. I have rarely regretted the risk I have taken. People respond to trust, respect and encouragement. My greatest gift as an educator was that I was able to get the “best out of the lame ducks.” Many of these lame ducks have done very well in their lives and continue to be good friends of mine.

Mary Grey, a feminist theologian says “‘caring’ is being present to each other in the pain of the particular memories.” It is in our woundedness that we are called to be healers. Her conclusion is

“If God is to be Emmanuel – truly at home in the Universe – then our structures of caring in religion and society must embody our passionate commitment to the interconnectedness of human well-being and ecological harmony.”⁴

This means that the fences which have been constructed by using so many dividing ‘isms’ such as sexism, racism, sectarianism, ageism and many others need to be confronted very seriously in supervision. I in my supervision am ready to take some risks to move some of the fences, at least a little. I encourage my students to do the same. Once a fence has been moved a little the next step is so much easier. In no time we are wondering why that fence was put there in the first place. The alternative to this is to build the fence even higher, build the foundations even deeper and make the way in even more difficult. What are we afraid of?

In reflecting on ‘this a very risky business’, I find that Veling suggests or argues that between trust and suspicion, between belonging and non-belonging, we find ourselves living in the moment of marginality. “This is where the *interpretive edge* of marginal Christian communities takes on most of its power and energy.” To do this we need space. We need space to be able to write in the margins, to make plans and corrections and propose questions and possible answers.

“This interpretive space merges the language of trust with the language of suspicion and leans transformatively into the language of possibility, of new writing in the margins, which could also be called a hermeneutic of reconstruction.”⁵

Margins, fences or boundaries. All have proven to be a means of helping INSTEP and its mission and me, in particular, to contribute to the goal of God’s salvific work in this moment and in this little place in history. **reo**

Endnotes

Veling, Terry E. *Living in the Margins. Intentional Communities and The Art of Interpretation* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1995), 1.

Veling, *Living in the Margins*, 2.

Unpublished paper. Charles Bayer, previously a visiting lecturer (from USA) in Ministry and Mission at CCTC.

Grey, Mary. *Devouring Mother or Wounded Healer. Pastoral Care and Context*. ed. Otto Strange (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1992), 96.

Veling, *Living in the Margins*, 20.

Further Reading:

Anderson Herbert & Edward Foley. *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving the Human and the Divine*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Publishers, 1998

Dulles, Avery. *Models of the Church*. New York: Image Doubleday, 1987

Whitehead E & Whitehead J. *Community of Faith. Crafting Christian Communities Today*. Connecticut: TwentyThird Publications, 1992

Sofield, Hammett & Juliano. *Building Community. Christian Caring Vital*. Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press 1998