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A (Boston) common place for worship

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HIGHLIGHT: An outdoor church service for homeless people has evolved into a nationwide ministry.

Despite having a job in communications that she loved, **Deborah Little** kept feeling she wasn't doing what she was meant to do with her life. She also yearned to know what it really means to "love your neighbor" - especially when that neighbor is stretched out on the sidewalk, and makes you want to turn away.

Yet it was several years, she says, before she found the courage to quit her job, enter Episcopal seminary, and explore a new kind of ministry. Ms. Little became a street priest. She began walking Boston sidewalks, hanging out at park benches and subway stations, and sharing peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and conversation with the homeless.

Pondering the way that Jesus went to where the people were, she realized one day that church needed to come to those who felt they couldn't enter a church. So on a bitter cold Sunday in 1996, Reverend Little held her first service at the fountain on Boston Common, a favorite bench site for many homeless people. The celebration has continued there at 1 p.m. every Sunday since.

"Taking the gifts of church to people means being out there no matter what," she says. "It means worship, celebration, prayer, companionship, accompaniment, and continuity."

This work, known as **Ecclesia Ministries**, has become a spiritual community involving activities throughout the week. And it is spurring the birth of similar ministries in many other cities.

For Roger, who comes each week, the "genuine, nonjudgmental sense of community" has genuinely helped. "They look at everyone like Christ - how can you beat that?" he asks.

The Boston homeless congregation decided to name their worship space "common cathedral." During the week, they can also join a Gospel Reflection session, held indoors; a Eucharist & Healing service, followed by fellowship; a "common cinema"; and "common art."

A local sculptor helped start art classes after two homeless men expressed a desire to do art. The jewelry, paintings, and stained glass items produced by a growing group of participants are now sold regularly in the neighborhood.

Word of mouth about the ministry has made its way to more than 35 cities. A Ford Foundation grant made it possible for Little to spend the past three years traveling in the United States and as far away as London, Rio de Janeiro, and Vancouver, B.C., to advise people who are interested in initiating similar programs. About a dozen are already under way.

To carry on the Boston work, the Rev. Joan Murray - who also made a midcareer switch into ministry (in the United Church of Christ) - was hired as common cathedral pastor.

On a recent brisk Sunday afternoon, Ms. Murray led a circle of worshipers in prayer, the 23rd Psalm, and hymns whose words are printed on a flier of the day's order of service. After a gospel reading by a member of the congregation, she preached briefly on the subject, "Watch, pray, and trust, trust, trust."

In the spirit of the participatory worship, a few congregants then shared their thoughts and prayers. Joe thanked God for recently acquired housing and prayed for a regular paycheck "to put it all together." Another spoke of working

hard on his faith. Even though faith is a gift of grace, he said, he's found that when you work on it, things really get better. Others asked for prayers for friends in need.

After celebrating the Eucharist with grape juice and bread, the congregation joined hands for a final song - a ringing rendition of "We Shall Overcome" - and the blessing.

The banjo player, Bill, who was once homeless but now has an apartment, brings special energy to the singing, leading such hymns as "Sweet Holy Spirit" and "Put Your Hand in the Hand of the Man From Galilee."

The Rev. Kathy McAdams of Ecclesia has developed ties with many area churches, and each week volunteers come to share in the service and serve lunch afterward at the fountain. At a recent service, families from a Korean Nazarene church in Reading, Mass., joined the circle along with their young children.

A mother of grown children, Murray spends many hours a week walking her "parish" to speak with street people. If it's very cold, she'll sometimes carry hats or socks to give out. But mostly she talks and prays with people and invites them to the service or other activities.

"The wonderful heart of the pastoral work, to me, is going with what presents itself," she says. "You are not in control, but I have a sense of God's spirit in it all."

Though she attends regular meetings with agencies that provide homeless services and is always ready to refer someone, "we are not case workers," she emphasizes. "We provide spiritual community."

Not long ago she learned how powerful simple, persistent caring can be. On one of her routes, she used to come upon a man named Frank on a particular street corner.

"I would always remember his name and ask how he was," she says. "I sometimes wondered why I did, since he was always drunk and nothing came of it." But she persisted for more than two years. Then he disappeared for six months.

One day, Frank showed up sober at common art. He said he'd had a spiritual awakening, was in a recovery program, and had come to give something back because Murray had been so nice to him. Frank comes each week to put away the tables and supplies after the art classes.

Those on the street sometimes build up trust, gain a little momentum, and then fall backward, Little says. A few men who have made it out of homelessness come to the services to be of help to the others.

Kevin happened upon common cathedral one Sunday, but has committed to coming regularly because he was on the street for 20 years and wants to pass on lessons learned. An attractive blond man who looks like a suburban dad, he says he was on cocaine and other drugs and came close to taking his life. Now he's in AA, and has a place to live and a job.

"Finally, I got on my knees and asked God to help me," he says. "I wish I had discovered **common cathedral** earlier in my experience, for the hope that someone was there for me." When you're on the street, you don't feel you can enter a church because people will stare at you as an outcast, he adds. "Coming out here is sending a message to people that God is there for you."

The pastors find that many street people are eager to talk about God. After conversation, Little often asks the person if they should pray together, and suggests the individual start the prayer. "Usually, the person starts, continues, and finishes the prayer - and often prays for me, too!" she laughs.

There is a lot of violence among street people, but there is also a great deal of kindness and looking out for one another. Some in the community are in permanent shelters, where they have more stability. Some have moved on to rehab or nursing homes, or to housing of their own. Yet the pastors are always coming upon new folks.

Little finds it a joy to work with the people who are starting ministries in other cities like Atlanta and Washington, D.C. "Their 'aha!' moments are so similar to what mine were," she says. "A man on the street keeps ignoring them over some time, and then one day, he looks up and smiles - and it's all worthwhile."

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