

The power of a sense on kinship as a way to fight poverty

On May 2 the Southeast Working-Class Task Force (SEW-CTF) attended the Faith & Action Project Conference where guest speaker Father Greg Boyle told the audience to embrace what he calls “radical kinship” or the “The Power of Kinship.”

In 1986, Fr. Boyle found himself serving as pastor to Los Angeles’ poorest Catholic parish--an area that also happened to have the highest concentration of gang activity in L.A., then considered the gang capital of the world. He soon founded what would become Homeboy Industries, which serves some 15,000 people a year, making it the largest gang intervention program in the world.

“What Martin Luther King Jr. said about church might well be said of your time here in this holy place,” Boyle said. “It’s not the place you come to, it’s the place you go from. And you go from here to imagine something of God, to imagine a circle of compassion and imagine no one standing outside that circle.”

He wants people to embrace “radical kinship” where they *widen the circle*:

- Draw people in rather than reach out to them.
- Provide a place within a community rather than a lifeline from a community.

The 7 things SEW-CTF learned from Fr. Boyle’s talk:

1. Service is only the beginning. While he lauded those who serve the people on the margins, Boyle also noted that serving is only a first step. “All of us sort of begin with service, which is a natural place to begin,” he said. “But then service is the hallway. You want to get to the ballroom, which is the place of exquisite mutuality, where there is no ‘us and them,’ there’s just us, which is the only place where you can stand against forgetting that we belong to each other.” He added: “Otherwise there’s a distance even in service – service provider and service recipient – and you don’t want that.”

2. We change when we meet people at the margins. In serving those who God loves most, we become the changed people God wants us to be, Boyle said, describing God as saying, “‘As I have loved you, so must you have the special preferential care and love for the widow, the orphan and the stranger.’ And God identifies these folks because God thinks these are the people who know what it’s like to be cut off.” Then Boyle added, “We don’t go to the margins to make a difference, because then it’s about you. We go to the margins so that the widow, the orphan and strange can alter our hearts forever.”

3. Sanctuary creates more sanctuary. Fr. Boyle described how Homeboy Industries’ 18-month training program attracts gang members because, “It’s a healing place where they can find rest from the chronic and toxic stress.” Then he described how that sanctuary creates a positive domino effect: “They find a sanctuary and they become the sanctuary they sought. And then they go home and provide that sanctuary to their kids, and for the first time they’ve broken the cycle.”

4. Wounds help us share healing. Sharing a story that held the audience in rapt silence, Boyle described one homie’s life as including so many beatings that he would wear three t-shirts so the blood on his back wouldn’t seep through. Over time, however, the homie found value in his scars. “I was ashamed of my wounds,” Boyle described the young man as saying. “I didn’t want anybody to see them. Now I welcome my wounds. I run my fingers over my scars. My wounds are my friends. After all, how can I help heal the wounded if I don’t welcome my own wounds?” Boyle underscored that sentiment by saying, “If we don’t welcome our own wounds, we may well be tempted to despise the wounded.”

5. It's about people, not groups. Asked by moderator Michael Twyman to describe some of the lessons he has learned in building up and operating Homebody Industries, Boyle pointed first to his efforts to address gang violence. "In the early days, I kind of worked with gangs and not just gang members, and that was misguided," he said. Instead, he realized, he needed to address the needs of individual gang members. "Gang violence is a language. It's about a lethal absence of hope," he said. "And I started to understand that no hopeful kid every joined a gang."

6. Healing first, help second. Another lesson learned: While gang members initially said that everything would improve if only they had jobs, Boyle learned over time that something else had to come first: "Healing is what needs to happen," he said. "A healed gang member will not re-offend. Healing first."

7. Compassion fatigue is a sign, not a problem. The challenge in putting off "compassion fatigue," he added, lies in truly understanding that your job is not saving lives, but walking with people. "Saving lives is for the Coast Guard," he said. "I'm really not interested in it."

The April/May newsletter is a compilation of ideas and quotes from the Faith & Action Project May Newsletter. See <https://www.cts.edu/faith-action-project/faith-action-newsletters/may-2019/>

*The SEW-CTF newsletter is edited by task force Chair John Harris Loflin (john.loflin@seindy.org).
The task force meets the 3rd Wednesday of the month at 6:30 on the 2nd floor at 901 Shelby St.*