

The Love Walks

By Ken Butigan

In the early 1990s in East Los Angeles, a group of women who are members of Dolores Mission Catholic Church were searching for a solution to the heavy toll that gang violence was taking in their neighborhood. Thirteen gangs were active in the parish, and gang killings and injuries were an almost daily occurrence. During a particularly violent period, the women were gathered in their prayer group, praying for a solution to this carnage.

That day, electrified with a sudden sense of discovery and consternation at the parallels of the Scripture reading of that day to their own predicament, one of the women felt that they were being called to stop huddling afraid behind their locked doors and drawn windows, fearful of their sons and neighbors, and to walk together in the midst of the war zone of the gangs.

After a long discussion, that night seventy women (and a few men) began a *peregrinación*—a pilgrimage or procession—from one gang turf to the next throughout the *barrio*. When they encountered startled gang-members who were preparing for battle, the mothers invited them to pray with them. They offered them chips, salsa, and soda. A guitar was produced—they were asked to join in singing the ancient songs that had come with them from Michoacan and Jalisco and Chiapas. Throughout the night, in thirteen war zones, the conflict was bafflingly, disorientingly interrupted. People were baffled; the gang members were disoriented.

Each night, the mothers walked and within a week there was a dramatic drop in gang-related violence. The members of the newly formed *Comite pro Paz en el Barrio* had responded to the emergency of the violence being waged in their locality by “breaking the rules of war.” By nonviolently intervening and intruding, they had challenged the old script of escalating violence and retaliation and created, for a time, a new and more creative script. Theirs had been more than a physical journey through their neighborhood. Most significantly, it had been the fundamental spiritual journey from the *war zone* to the *house of love*.

By entering this zone of danger, they had created a momentary space for peace. In that space, all the parties were able to glimpse their humanness. The gang-members were able to see, many for the first time, other human beings caring about them. At the same time, the women were able to let go of their paralyzing fear and anger long enough to see the human face of members of the gangs. It is no accident that the women christened their night-time journeys “Love Walks.”

But this project did more than briefly interrupt the escalating cycles of violence.

By provoking a confrontation with their humanness, they unleashed a process of communication and transformation. Their activity changed the gang-members and themselves. The women listened to the deep anguish of the gang-members about the lack of jobs and about police brutality. This led them, in turn, to develop a tortilla factory, bakery, and child-care center, creating some jobs and giving the gang-members an opportunity to acquire job skills. It was also a space where conflict resolution techniques were learned, because people from different gangs worked together in these projects. The women then opened a school. And they shifted from a “Neighborhood Watch” mode—where they were the eyes and ears of the police—to a group trained to monitor and report abusive police behavior, a development that has redefined the relationship between the Los Angeles Police Department and the *barrio*.

The people in this neighborhood are the first to say that they have not achieved a utopia. There is still poverty, racism, and violence. Nevertheless, they have taken an enormous step toward creating a much more human environment. They did this by risking being human together.