

God
At
Geylang

**His Stories in Singapore Red-Light District
(2008 -2020)**

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with Tan Lay Leng

From the Author

God At Geylang documents stories of the Creator-God who loves deeply every single life He creates, including the marginalized and downcast people group at Geylang! It is our prayer that you will be blessed by these stories. As God loves this special group of people, He loves you too.

I would like to thank many people: my husband, my three boys, my helper, my team, my church, Geylang Ministry supporters....and every person in these stories.

Yet it is to **God** I render my highest tribute and praise.

Debbie Zhang

Situated at the eastern fringe of the central region of Singapore, Geylang is perhaps most infamously known as the red-light district of Singapore.

For the protection of Geylang community, most of the names in “God At Geylang” are not real.

Bible verses are quoted in New King James Version (NKJV), unless otherwise stated. All currencies are in Singapore dollar unless otherwise stated.

GM Geylang Ministry

HOL House of Olive Leaf

YWAM Youth With A Mission

FMH Faith Mission Home

Agape Agape Christian Centre

COOS Church of Our Saviour

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But Jesus looked at them and said to them,
“With men this is impossible,
but with God all things are possible.”
Matthew 19:26

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Chapter 1

Impossible Made Possible

His Story

These real-life stories of anonymous ones at Geylang are really His story. Time and again, we encountered the impossible, and time and again, God showed up to teach us it is about Him, not us.

But Jesus looked at them and said to them, “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

Matthew 19:26

God, impossible!

So, how did it all begin? I remembered I could not stop weeping as I walked from Sims Avenue to Lorong 23, Geylang. The walk was short but the tears seemed to take a long time to stop flowing. God had just spoken into my heart about the ladies whose accent I had recognized to be that from my birth country. When I first heard it, I could not understand what those ladies were doing in this part of Singapore. In my heart I questioned, “Why are these ladies here?” Then suddenly, God revealed it to me. They were in the prostitution industry.

That was in the year 2007 when I first went to Geylang in order to attend a Bible school with Youth With A Mission (YWAM). After five months, I was going to finish my course and I was rejoicing

that I would finally leave Geylang, this place that was filled with pain and heartaches. I had thought that the best way to 'escape' was to run away and cover my eyes since I did not know how to help the ladies in the streets.

At the same time, however, I felt God was asking me to start the Geylang Ministry (GM). Like Moses in the Bible who tried to run away from God's call, I told Him all the challenges in my life that would spell 'impossible': my family situation, my lack of experience, my lack of theological training, and my lack of finance.

Moreover, there were attractive opportunities for me to re-enter the marketplace and serving God as a ministry worker was the last thing on my mind. Working in the marketplace, would give me financial security to not only support myself and others but also to pursue my passions.

But God challenged me with a question, "Where is your heart and what are the motives behind your plans?"

His question struck me at my innermost being. Since becoming a Christian, the reality of His transformative grace and compassion have shown me how the hope in Christ can see us through all circumstances of our lives. I have been truly blessed to experience this hope in my life and I know He laid this burden for the Geylang people in

my heart so that they too, can see this hope in their lives.

I wept before God. Confronted by a loving God who knew my deepest thoughts and my heart for the Geylang ladies, I responded by surrendering all my plans to Him. If He wanted my full devotion to the ministry, then so be it.

I sought God's counsel for three months. I had no idea how to help the Geylang ladies. Besides, I was fearful to be wrongly mistaken as one of these ladies if I were to walk alone in the streets as part of the outreach.

“You Will Never Walk Alone”

I did not sleep well during those days. After one restless night, I awoke before dawn and went into the study where I usually prayed to seek God. For five years, I had never noticed something until that morning. Placed on the desk and emblazoned on my husband's Liverpool jersey souvenir were the words, **“You will never walk alone.”**

I knew it was God telling me in no uncertain terms that He would walk with me through this journey of sharing His love with Geylang ladies. Despite this assurance, I was met with many challenges and trials. YWAM, as well as the Geylang churches all rejected my proposal for this ministry as they felt they were not ready for it. Some, including myself,

began to question if God had really called me to reach out to the Geylang ladies.

One afternoon, I was travelling with my husband Kelvin in our vehicle, holding David, my three-year-old eldest son, in my arm. Faced with the hard reality of rejections from the very people whom I thought I could rely on, I was burdened and downtrodden. What could I do if I did not even have a place in Geylang? Suddenly, a car cut right into our lane and right there at the back of the car was the very words again **"You will never walk alone."**

My spirit uplifted and I finally said "Yes" to God on one condition that He would provide all the needed resources so that I could focus on serving the people at Geylang.

And He did. YWAM soon approached me to talk about the ministry. At the earlier stage of GM, the money would pour in miraculously, often in the exact amounts even without our telling anyone the needs. Over the years, there were a few occasions when I was raising the fund, and the donors would send in the money without knowing the appeals. God is indeed faithful to His promise.

The Seed of Compassion

God has also planted the seeds of compassion and burden in my heart. The journey has not been easy for me, often filled with the mountaintop and valley moments. Without God walking with me, I would

never have come this far. It has been good 12 years serving God in this ministry.

I remember fondly Ah Ling, the first Geylang lady whom God used me to minister to. Almost every morning, promptly at 8.30am, for three months, she would stand outside the classroom where I attended the Bible school to listen to us while we sang songs to start the school day. As Kelvin and I needed to send David to the childcare centre first, we were always the last students to rush into the Faith Mission Home (FMH) where the Bible class was held. Ah Ling and I started to smile at each other whenever we saw each other at the doorway.

Ah Ling would confide in me later that the Christian songs the students sang ministered to her heart and soothed her distress.

Faith Mission Home (FMH)

In February 2017, FMH finished its new centre building project. "We are coming back to Geylang with a fresh mission God is leading us to," Brother Chester said, as he showed me around the new building and offered GM an alternative place to use when the space at Agape Christian Centre (Agape) was not available. Above that, after three years of praying for GM, FMH not only mobilized its members for GM's Christmas carolling from 2012 to 2014, but also provided its centre premise for the carollers to gather in those years when Agape was occupied. In March 2017, Agape notified GM that the renovation project of their centre building would start soon. Hence GM simply moved into FMH from Agape in April 2017. How good of God to have prepared a place for GM beforehand!

Roadblocks and Rewards

While the initial steps to connect seemed relatively smooth, the journey with the ladies was nothing near that at all. In fact, it has been emotionally draining for both my team and me.

One such lady was ‘rescued’ out of prostitution and placed in YWAM. To attend the Bible school, she made an attempt to have a clean cut with the ‘uncle’ boyfriend who was one of her customers. However, the ‘uncle’ managed to locate my contact from the mobile phone he had bought for the lady and started sending messages to harass me because I “took” the lady away from him. To make things worse, the disciple course was delayed for two weeks and during this time, she suddenly changed her mind and wanted to leave. And she did... with the ‘uncle’ waiting right at YWAM!

Confronted with much distress and many betrayals, I asked myself many times if these people would really change. In fact, I would be the first to admit that being highly educated myself, I used to look down on ladies in this trade. While I recognized that only God can break the mindsets trapping these ladies, I would have given up had God not seeded in me the compassion for them.

Roadblocks were plenty but so were rewards. In the course of building relationships with the brothel owners and workers, my team and I made it a point to note their birthdates so we could celebrate

birthdays with them. Kelvin would specially print out their birthday photos, framed and personalised them as a birthday gift for them. As we sang birthday songs and prayed for them, we, in turn, were returned with joyous and thankful smiles on their faces which were absolutely priceless. It might be a small gesture to us but it meant so much to them. It was not often they got to celebrate their birthdays this way.

In the early days, besides the betrayals from the ladies, I had to also learn to manage the many issues that came with managing my team of volunteers. God would use all opportunities to build me up including challenging me to rethink and focus why I do what I do.

Tough Beginnings

I still remember GM's early days in 2008. Not knowing how to start the ministry, I made it a point to go to Geylang twice in a week, hoping God would give me some ideas or inspiration. Since 1994, I have been working in Singapore as an import agent for Chinese goods. Many times, I would wander aimlessly in the streets of Geylang, only to be "woken" by phone calls from customers asking for price quotations. The stark contrast of my life to that of the street ladies, of my current rewarding job to that of this clueless ministry, made me question hard how I could even land myself in this situation. In my mind, I reckoned the best approach was to invite the ladies to some activities

in order to befriend them, yet no church in Geylang was willing to partner me by providing its place for that use. However, miracles would happen, and God would assure me that the invitation to partner Him was real. I never felt God so near during those tough and lonely days.

Geylang Christians and COOS

Agape was the first Christian organization I approached. Agape was at a strategic location in Lorong 11 and many ladies from China would be standing outside its door daily. It would be a good opportunity to befriend the ladies by simply inviting them into the centre to have some tea together. But Agape had kept saying no despite my requests several times.

When the churches at Geylang began to open their doors to welcome the ladies, they were shocked to see them still standing outside the churches after the church services, soliciting prostitution. Some churches had helped to sponsor the ladies their airfare after hearing their pitiful stories of how they were being cheated to Singapore, yet after one month, the same ladies would appear in the Geylang streets again. Hence, it was understandable why the Geylang Christians, including those at Agape, closed the door tightly to the Geylang ladies. Pastor Soh of Agape would chase the ladies away from its corridor each time he entered Agape. At an overseas conference, God had touched the heart of Pastor Soh and spoken to

him regarding his rejection of the Geylang ladies. One day, when Pastor Soh was sitting inside Agape, thinking that the Geylang ladies were also the people God loved dearly, he saw a China lady in front of the centre. She was looking at the Chinese words “Jesus is the Lord” engraved on the gate of Agape and she started tearing. Pastor Soh, who was inside Agape, witnessed everything and started to tear too. He immediately called for the meeting with me and opened up Agape for GM to use its place free of charge till its renovation in 2017! Hence it was nothing short of amazing that after 10 years, in 2018, Pastor Soh became one of the directors of House of Olive Leaf (HOL) which GM currently operates from!

It was yet another amazing story how Church of Our Saviour (COOS), my local church, partnered GM. COOS was a very dynamic church with a few thousand members and I was only an ordinary member. I came to know Pastor Vanaja of COOS International Division through one of the courses I attended. Pastor Vanaja has since journeyed with me when I shared with her my passion for the Chinese nationals. But COOS was located in Queenstown, a distance away from Geylang. At that time, my urgent need for GM was a place in Geylang. Pastor Derek, then senior pastor of COOS and Pastor Soh knew each other through their work. One day, Pastor Soh shared with Pastor Derek that Agape was partnering GM to provide the counselling service to the Geylang ladies. He also

told Pastor Derek how he rejected me so many times till God convicted him to repent. In their conversation with each other, Pastor Soh recalled that I was from COOS. It was said that Pastor Derek, with his tearful eyes, gave a big hug to Pastor Soh upon hearing that Agape finally gave me a place to help the ladies. Hence it did not surprise me when one day, while I was exploring with Pastor Vanaja about the possibility of financial help from COOS for a street lady, Pastor Derek suddenly appeared. He said that COOS would not only support GM but sponsor me too. Since 2008, COOS has been giving me a monthly love gift.

You Shall Love Your Neighbour As Yourself

Staying on course has not been easy. I even argued with God as to how much I could do, "It is inevitable that I will pass on one day. Who will continue to reach out to the Geylang ladies then?" God surprised me when He showed me a cross on a church when I stepped out of Aljunied MRT station the next day. "You are just the start," I heard God whisper to me gently, "My people in Geylang will take up this task."

Over the years, whether GM was under the supervision of YWAM or COOS, I always remembered the conviction that GM belongs to the Christians in Geylang, and I never stop working on bridging the kingdom partnership unless God says otherwise. It took me one whole year in 2017 to explore if it was God's timing for GM to move

towards partnering Geylang churches in more areas. Over the years, COOS has provided the financial resources and helped in the volunteers recruitment drive. It would be challenging for GM to run independently but at the same time, I also doubted if God was also putting the same conviction for the Geylang people amongst the Geylang Christians. During one Bible reading time, I came across Mark 12:29-31 and the words "love your neighbour as yourself" leapt at me! I was convinced me that it was God's heart for Christians in Geylang to reach out to their neighbours, including those who work in the red-light district in Geylang. I knew God would go before me to talk to Geylang churches of this task ahead for them.

When I spoke with Pastor Daniel, the new senior pastor at COOS, of the decision for GM to run independently under HOL, an NGO we registered as a halfway house for ex-Geylang ladies in 2014, he not only extended his understanding but also committed the continued support for GM by the church. On the 10th of April 2018, I met up with Pastor YC and Pastor Kim from Agape. That early morning, Luke 10:27 appeared in my daily Bible reading. God is amazing!

“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind,” and ‘your neighbour as yourself.’”

Luke 10:27

I Would Look After Your Loved Ones!

Over the years, one of my biggest struggles has been my time given to my three boys. I often felt the sense of guilt for not spending enough time with my kids to coach them in their studies as well as not sending them to any tuition classes due to the financial constrain. Hence, at the end of the year 2016, I was seriously considering leaving GM. GM had done the pioneering work in Geylang. It would be easy for any Christians, even if they were not under GM, to pick up the baton of outreach to the brothels. On top of that, David, my eldest son, would be sitting for his Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) the following year. I felt that I needed to give David my time during his PSLE preparations.

In December 2016, GM partnered Pastor Soh of Agape to organize a Geylang gathering, whereby Geylang churches and those ministries who were doing outreaches in Geylang were invited to come together to seek God's face.

At that event, I had a picture in mind that in a snowy winter, Jesus was holding the hands of my three kids, who were warmly clothed. I tried to look more closely, and neither Kelvin nor I was in that scenario. I knew that God was assuring me He would look after my loved ones. Since then, I made up my mind never to consider stepping down from GM unless God told me to do so.

What He Says, Goes

In early 2017, God had set up a divine meeting with Brother Chester of FMH. He was showing me around the new centre building to explore the possible partnership with GM, and I had shared with him my early struggle to step down from GM. Chester sighed and said, "It is just one of the examinations in our kids' lives." His comment was a wake-up call for me and I began to release my burden for David's PSLE to God.

On that very day, I stopped my car at a junction and realized that the compound on my right side was the secondary school that David desired to enter. "David will be admitted into this school," I heard God's whisper. How could that happen? I found that idea ridiculous because it was a 'Direct School Admission' school and David was not selected. With God, what He says goes. The school invited David to apply for its admission again with his PSLE results, which was actually not among the top scores. The teachers who interviewed David seemed very inspired by the fact that David never had any tuition classes since young. So David was admitted in the end! God never fails His promise to those who choose to obey Him.

My biggest gain to serve in GM over the past 12 years is to experience the reality of God in all the challenges and grow in the maturity to learn to partner with Him to overcome the impossible.

As you read the stories of God At Geylang, if you are struggling through a difficult patch, do not be discouraged. You are not alone!