

Caring for the poor



PART THREE. UNDERSTANDING THE POOR: CONGREGATIONAL STORIES

Choose to Be with the Poor

BY IRVIN HEISHMAN

When First Church in Harrisburg began working with the homeless in its neighborhood, it found it was “like offering someone an aspirin when what they needed was to be rushed to intensive care.”

People who face limited resources and opportunities—the poor—cannot be understood from a physical distance nor solely from an academic, scholarly distance. The journey to understand the poor will require many of us to go to places we might otherwise avoid.

If we know the personal story of a homeless, single mother, an inner-city kid, or a new immigrant working three jobs at minimum wage, it would shock and pain us to see injustice and prejudice limiting his or her options, self-confidence, and opportunities.

More distant levels of involvement provide essential support for the poor, like serving in soup kitchens or at workcamps or providing financial resources for service organizations. But combining this support with more direct

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one-on-one involvement gives greater opportunity for spiritual growth and wider understanding.

DIG IN FOR THE LONG HAUL

“Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your

land” (Deut. 15:11). This scripture calls for an open-handed, long-haul approach to those in need. Our most rewarding and productive responses to poverty will be long-term involvement with others.

Our rich Brethren heritage of response to disasters has perhaps not served us well

in understanding how to respond to poverty. The damage caused by a tornado can often be fixed quickly, and this repair is enormously gratifying. But the damage caused by the abuse and neglect of a child, for example, is not so easily repaired. This person needs a stable community of faith, ready to patiently provide opportunities for healing, nurturing, and guidance.



Phil Grout

LEARN AS YOU GO

When First Church of the Brethren began working with the homeless in our community, our original design for the ministry was simple and inadequate. We would provide temporary housing and an hour a week of counseling. It was like offering someone aspirin when what they really needed was to be rushed to intensive care. But we learned and, by the grace of God, some people benefitted.

Then we were led through prayerful discernment to a deeper level of response. An “intensive care” model of case management was inaugurated and we began seeing significant results. More families were making greater progress toward self-sufficiency and personal and spiritual wholeness. We continued expanding the program by buying old houses and restoring them to their original beauty.

Now fourteen years later, with six buildings containing sixteen apartments, four outstanding staff members, and a budget of over \$200,000 supported by eight partner congregations, this ministry with the homeless (Brethren Housing Association or BHA) has achieved a rewarding level of significance. If we had waited until we knew what we were doing, we may never have gotten started.

SHARE YOUR FAITH

Representatives of about 200 families come to our church each Friday morning to receive a supplemental bag of groceries and some fresh produce. We noticed that some people began arriving as early as 8 a.m., even though the food bus doesn't arrive until 11 a.m. So we decided to try a faith sharing experiment. We invited those early birds to come into the church, if they wanted to, for a morning Bible study. We guaranteed that they would not lose their place in the food line for doing so.

Quite a number responded. Some of these later started coming to Sunday morning worship and joined the church. These new members now serve



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as powerful teachers for the Bible study groups. They keep inviting more to come in and then to come to worship. The Bible study has become a kind of stepping stone into the life-giving Christian community of faith.

Bread is shared generously on Friday mornings. And as that sharing of bread brings people together in a loving community, they discover as well the Bread of Life. It happens so naturally that we almost forget it might have something to do with evangelism. And people get tears in their eyes when they try to express what it all means to them.

EXPECT GIFTEDNESS

He was a stranger, a visitor at our church. We soon discovered that he was a resident at the local mission, a shelter for homeless men. We welcomed him and provided transportation so he could come to an evening Bible study. It didn't take long until his extraordinary giftedness was apparent, and we soon began to wonder how we had managed to get

along without him. He did research for us at the state library, unearthing marvelous stories of our congregation's past for our centennial celebration. He began to cook for our catered congregational meals. When it was time to "move into the twentieth century" and computerize the church office, he installed the equipment and software and trained the church staff in how to use it. When our organizer was on vacation, he was our able substitute. He became our church custodian and the resident caretaker of our transitional housing program for homeless families. Our church newsletter still bears the imprint of his design established when he was its editor.

When Dallas Mayor died a few years ago, we realized that he had shattered all our images of homeless men and that he had had a profound impact on our congregation, changing us for the better. Not all gifts are so apparent. But we lose much if we fail to look for and expect to be blessed by the gifts of those we welcome and serve.

COUNT THE COST

This journey into deeper understanding of the poor is costly. Identification with under-represented and disadvantaged people can mean taking on some of the stigma and facing prejudice that is part of their daily experience.

Ministry with the poor also costs money. The passion to serve may place the compassionate person in the role of begging for funds to meet the needs of people to whom they have been called to serve. My spiritual director said, "Begging for the poor is a time-honored vocation in the history of the church." Still, we may feel lonely among others who do not understand or share our passion, but we will "choose to be with" people who may well feel embarrassed to stream to our church for food vouchers. But we remember that Jesus humbled himself among us that we might find life in him, so we continue that work, humbling ourselves to walk with others that they might also find life in all its fullness.

THE LORD WILL KEEP ME ROLLING

One of my newest friends I'll call Tom. He lives just a few yards from our church in a weathered rental facing an alley. His appearance would be a fright to many with his neglected lengths of straggling hair and beard atop his skinny frame. Tom has the smell of decay on him. Trying not to discriminate on the basis of smell, I've learned that behind Tom's roughened exterior lives a gentle, tenderhearted, and thoughtful person. The Almighty could not have ignored his prayers for my daughter when she had her tonsils removed.

Tom drives an ancient station wagon that is only a dull, faded shadow of its original red. Where the car once sported a back window, there is plastic attached with duct tape. Some kids in the neighborhood had smashed the window one night. Undaunted, Tom worked for months to save up enough money to buy a replacement window from a junkyard. He recently bought the window and is now saving money to have it installed.

The other day I was stopped at a red light, and to my delight Tom's old car came cruising by, plastic and duct tape proudly flapping in the wind. It brought me immediate joy, "I know that car. I know that man." And I smiled, "In spite of all he's been through, look how he keeps those ancient wheels rolling." When I'm tempted to worry about things like financing my children's education, Tom's spirit reminds me that the Lord will keep me rolling whatever challenges come.

Tom also reminds me how rich I am in things and tempers my materialistic wanting. When I'm tempted to feel embarrassed to be driving an "old bomb," Tom reminds me of how privileged I am to be the owner of a fine '87 Olds. In his view, my car is just nicely broken in with 158,000 miles to its credit! It is, after all, paid for! With Tom's encouragement, I'll probably keep it for awhile.

—*Irvin Heishman*