
HUMANIZING & CONTEXTUALIZING HOMELESSNESS

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Downtown Fellowship of Churches and Ministries

TERMINOLOGY?

“Transients”

“Homeless people”

“People experiencing homelessness”

“Unsheltered people”

“Displaced people”

“The homeless community”

“People who don’t have stable housing right now”

PEOPLE – Neighbors – Friends

GOALS FOR TODAY

- 1) To **humanize** and **contextualize** the “homelessness problem”
- 2) To **empower** Christians to more confidently relate to and serve people who experience homelessness and poverty
- 3) To **inspire** some of you to become personally involved in ministering to the homeless community



HUMANIZING HOMELESSNESS

WHAT IS HOMELESSNESS REALLY LIKE FOR THE PEOPLE EXPERIENCING IT?

WHAT IS HOMELESSNESS REALLY LIKE?

Video

Homeless people often describe their experience using **psychological, social, and spiritual** terms.

- Lack of support
- Lack of stability
- Darkness
- Unraveling
- Hiding feelings
- Friendship with the devil
- Not being able to provide
- Loss
- Nothingness
- Running from your past
- Running from God
- No self-respect
- Shame
- Fear

PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS

“I mostly stopped talking when I became homeless. What I had to say no longer seemed to matter... It’s very difficult to stay anchored in your body as a homeless person, because **it’s too painful to feel your body when you can’t house it or feed it or feel safe in it.”**

—Lori Yearwood, *Washington Post*

SOCIAL ALIENATION

“People who I had been friends with for years, known them my whole life—suddenly **it’s like I don’t matter anymore**. They just said, ‘You’ll be ok, you’ll figure it out.’”

—Mentorship Program participant

SPIRITUAL PAIN

“There I was, under the bridge, alone with my thoughts, alone with my drugs and my porn, **hopeless and just waiting to die**, when I tried talking to God one more time...”

–Ladle Fellowship guest

WHAT IS HOMELESSNESS REALLY LIKE?

Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (which means “son of Timaeus”), was **sitting by the roadside begging**. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” **Jesus stopped** and said, “Call him.” So they called to the blind man, “Cheer up! On your feet! He’s calling you.” Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus.

“What do you want me to do for you?” **Jesus asked him**.

The blind man said, “Rabbi, I want to see.”

“Go,” said Jesus, “your faith has healed you.” Immediately he received his sight and **followed Jesus along the road**.

-Mark 10:46-52

THE CULTURE OF CHRONIC HOMELESSNESS

- Lengthy homelessness + disabling conditions
- Severe alienation from normal societal systems
- No sense of belonging to the larger community
- Alternative community and family structures
 - The Caretaker-Partner, the Street Mom, the Enforcer, the Community Representative, etc.
- People who are “hard to help”

RECOGNIZING OUR BARRIERS

- Culture shock and lack of understanding
- Materialism + Individualism + Moralism
- Death/suffering denial
- Savior-complex

The poor tell us who we are, the prophets tell us who we could be; so we hide the poor, and kill the prophets. –Philip Berrigan

LEARNING HUMAN STORIES

<https://www.talesofthestreet.com/>



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THE CHURCH'S ROLE

Building **friendships** with people who lack shelter and **welcoming communities** where people can find belonging must be a part of our response to homelessness.



CONTEXTUALIZING HOMELESSNESS

WHAT FACTORS CAUSE PEOPLE TO BECOME HOMELESS?

A RECIPE FOR HOMELESSNESS



UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA

Post-traumatic stress disorder: when the neurobiological fight-or-flight response gets lodged in the brain and reactivated long after the original threat has disappeared

Moral injury: the traumatic violation of someone's most deeply held moral beliefs, values, and expectations

- Guilt/shame-based, resulting in a loss of trust and meaning

Safe, secure experiences today can help to heal the trauma of yesterday.

UNDERSTANDING MENTAL ILLNESS

Mental illness...

- CAN make coping with the stresses of daily life much more difficult
- CAN go through cycles of “relapse” and “recovery”
- CAN include psychosis (hallucinations), but often does not
- CAN be a treated effectively with therapies including medication
- Is NOT caused by a lack of intelligence or integrity
- Is NOT cured simply by will power or determination
- Does NOT consign someone to a lifetime of homelessness
- Does NOT prevent someone from being a healthy, contributing member of the community

Positive relationships and community belonging are a crucial aspect of improving mental health.

UNDERSTANDING SUBSTANCE ABUSE

The pull of the drug:

- Emotional wounds that haven't healed—a way to **numb**
- Life challenges that seem overwhelming—a way to **cope**
- Physical or mental symptoms that won't go away—a way to **self-medicate**
- Friends, family, and culture—a way to **socially bond with others**
- Shame, guilt, and anger—a way to **offend** or **avoid God**

Relational and spiritual healing can reduce the pull of the drug and increase resiliency against substance addiction.

SPIRITUAL HOMELESSNESS

“Unmet spiritual needs have been associated with greater emotional distress, more pain, and poorer quality of life. In addition, patients with spiritual struggles often have poorer daily physical functioning, more depression and anxiety, higher costs of medical care, poor satisfaction with care, and increased mortality.”

(The Joint Commission, *The Source*, Jan. 2018)

“Thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee.”

—Augustine, *Confessions*



EMPOWERED FOR MINISTRY

HOW CAN WE BUILD TRANSFORMATIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE POOR?

WHO ARE THE “POOR”?

BROKENNESS OF THE MATERIALLY POOR

Lack of hope

GOD

Materialism

Low self-esteem

SELF

Pride

Estrangement
from family

OTHERS

Radical
individualism

Unemployment

CREATION

Workaholism

BROKENNESS OF THE MATERIALLY NON-POOR

A GOSPEL FOR THE POOR

Our Culture Values...

Material wealth

Knowledge and education

Beauty and youth

Individualistic ambition

Compensation based on merit

Transactional 'tit-for-tat'
relationships

Self-promotion and publicity

But Jesus Says...

"Life does not consist in an abundance of possessions"

"You have hidden these things from the wise and learned..."

"Do not judge by outward appearances"

"Love your neighbor as yourself"

"The first shall be last"

"Freely you have received; freely give"

"When you give the needy, don't announce it with trumpets..."

FOUNDATIONS OF RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING

Shared brokenness

- *I'm fundamentally similar to you, I'm just broken in my own ways.*

Humility (personal and cultural)

- *My way of doing things isn't the only right way, and it isn't necessarily the best way for you.*

Focusing on commonalities

- *We are both driven by a desire for love, meaning, and significance, and we are both in need of God's forgiving grace.*

Kindness

Time and practice!!!! (earning a mentoring voice)

GIFTS OF THE GOSPEL

Spiritual Peace:

Then Jesus said, “Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light.”

—Matthew 11:28-30

The Power to Make Choices:

“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

—John 8:31

FOLLOWING JESUS

His first priority was his **relationship with his Father**. His next priority was his **human relationships**.

He did not stand apart from sinners and sufferers. He drew near to them with **scandalous grace and mercy**.

He did not allow the crowds to dictate his life. He **set appropriate boundaries** and challenged his followers to become mature.

He demonstrated love with his **presence**, his **demeanor**, his **questions**, and his **truth-telling**.



PRACTICAL APPLICATION

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

LET'S TALK ABOUT DANGER

- Homeless people are frequently *victims* of crime, especially women and people who are mentally or physically disabled.
- Some homeless people have committed violent crimes. Some of these people are still dangerous. Many of them are not.
- Although acute psychiatric crisis can sometimes manifest violently, the vast majority of mental health issues are not violent.
- The most common street drug in San Diego is methamphetamine (crystal meth). Meth tends to increase mood swings and aggression.

WHAT ABOUT PANHANDLING?

- **Safety first.**
 - If someone is visibly intoxicated or exhibiting aggression, just keep walking.
- **Personally engage.**
 - Make eye contact. Say hello, good morning, how are you.
- **Take time to read the situation.**
 - Don't get sucked into an "emergency" too quickly. Don't be afraid to ask questions.
- If you feel like giving money, and the situation seems right—go for it. If you don't, simply say, "Sorry, I can't."
- If you can, take the time to stop and chat. **Listen, develop rapport, get to know the individual.**



Q & A

FOLLOW UP!

sdfellowship.com/mentorship

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