

Hospitality to Strangers

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A person is considered homeless who

Lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate night-time residence; and . . . has a primary night time residence that is: (A) a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations . . . (B) an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized, or (C) a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings.¹

This definition includes children and adults temporarily living with family and friends, living out of a car or in a motel, in an abandoned building, church basement, train station or awaiting foster care placement. In 2003, 39% of the homeless population was children. Of these children, 42% were under the age of five years old,² when children develop social, emotional, physical, and intellectual patterns and abilities that will shape them for the rest of their lives. In other words, just less than 20% of the homeless population is children under the age of 5 years old. What can they possibly make of this world in which they live?

Today after services we are offering training for anyone interested in participating in our work hosting Interfaith Hospitality Network (IHN) Families. These families are homeless, usually single mothers with children awaiting affordable, quality housing in Cincinnati. The waiting list for Section 8 housing in Cincinnati is just under 3 years. To me, this waiting time for homeless individuals and families is immoral. We can do better as a society and nation. Three years is a long time to wait when you have a toddler and a school age child who are homeless. They will get an education, but not the kind a parent, child, or society wants, needs, or deserves.

For two weeks in April (April 1 – April 14), and two weeks in May (May 20 – June 3) First Church will host IHN guest families, and IHN encourages us to refer to the adults and children who come here as our “guests”. Every evening at 5:00PM the IHN bus will bring our guests here. They will be fed by our members and many faith based partners, including the Cincinnati Mennonite Fellowship, Congregation Beth Adam, St. John’s Unitarian Church, Heritage UU, West Cincinnati Presbyterian, and Walnut Hills Christian, an interfaith effort right here in our congregation. After dinner children will do homework, adults will watch TV and try to relax (How do you relax when you are homeless?) They will sleep on cots in our lower level religious education area. Every morning (weekday and weekend) between 7:00AM and 9:00PM children and parents will

¹ National Coalition for the Homeless, “Who Is Homeless,” Fact Sheet #3 (2006).

² Ibid.

again get on a bus that takes them to school, or the IHN center, or other activities. Last year 64% of the people served by IHN were children.³

And somehow, even with that excruciating waiting list for Section 8 housing, IHN succeeds in its mission to place families in stable housing. Last year 75% of IHN families found stable housing. This success is due to the diligence, professionalism, work, and commitment of the IHN staff, board, and partner congregations. IHN is a remarkably well-run non-profit organization, and I am delighted to partner with them. I recently attended their annual meeting, and it was a treat to see a non-profit that is so reliable, successful, and well-managed.

All of our children in religious education are learning about homelessness so I hope you will continue this conversation when you go home this afternoon. If you are bringing a meal for IHN guests this spring, please feel free to bring your children with you, you will find families a lot like you when you come. (*Ask volunteers to stand* – cots, donations, food, publicity, and curriculum). This is living our UU values of justice, equity and compassion, and respecting the inherent worth of every person. Thank you. Our worship theme for this year is energy for what matter, and this matters, so thank you, thank you.

During this week's Torah Study class at Beth Adam we studied the Genesis story of Sodom and Gomorrah. In this story strangers have come to the town and the local villagers are ready to attack them in violent ways. Only one resident, Lot, has the hospitality to take them in, and although Lot himself has marginal judgment (a topic for another sermon), the oldest meaning of this story is the value of human care and hospitality. Conservative Christians will tell you it is a story against homosexuality, but the story is so much deeper than sexual orientation. It is about power and how we care for the vulnerable in our society. One of the oldest interpretations of this story comes from the prophet Ezekiel who writes (speaking of cities in the feminine) "This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and the needy." (Ezekiel 16:49).

Ezekiel preached during the Babylonian exile in 587 B. C. E., which places his interpretation of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah as one of the oldest, and certainly closer to the creation of the story than later Christian interpretations. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah also comes immediately after the story of Abraham and Sarah entertaining strangers with hospitality, after which Sarah, who has long been unable to conceive, is promised the birth of a son. Back to back stories about how to treat strangers, those who come needing food and shelter. In both the story of Abraham and Sodom and Gomorrah the strangers are angels, which is why I heard this quote from *Hebrews* at the IHN annual meeting "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it (*Hebrews* 13:2)." Clearly the ancient Semitic world placed a premium on hospitality to strangers and those in need of food and shelter. They gave energy to it because it mattered. How about us?

With the story of Sodom and Gomorrah receiving copious religious airplay as a story against homosexuality, instead of poverty, it would seem not. With statistics on homelessness increasing at alarming rates, it would seem not. In a study of homeless rates from 182 cities between 1981 and 1989, homelessness tripled.⁴ In the last 15 years

³ IHN Annual Report 2006.

⁴ National Coalition for the Homeless, NCH Fact Sheet #2 (2006).

homelessness has increased by 150% in the greater Cincinnati area.⁵ It's not just you. There are a lot more homeless people out there.

This week I spoke with Georgine Getty, the Executive Director of the Greater Cincinnati Coalition for the Homeless. She explained to me

The biggest misperception is that homeless people are middle-aged men who are addicted and want to be homeless (Bob Moore, Executive Director of IHN said the same thing to me). Women and children are the invisible homeless. The media shows men, not homeless families in shelters or living with family and friends. The number one reason for homelessness among men is that they are just not earning enough money. Sixty percent of homeless men in Cincinnati work.

Ms. Getty's perception is backed up again by Bob Moore and by the National Coalition of the Homeless (NCH). NCH lists poverty and limited affordable housing as the major two causes of homelessness. NCH links poverty to stagnant wages, a low minimum wage (which has lost 25% of its value in the last 30 years), limited health care coverage, a net loss of low-wage jobs, and a decline in public assistance. All of this combined with a couple of cataclysmic events (job loss, divorce, health problems) and individuals and families are thrown into homelessness.

Bob Moore explained to me

Some people don't understand that homeless people are just people too. We have been influenced by stereotypes of the homeless. The fastest growing segment of the homeless population is children. Homeless families are not much different than we are. They have had one cataclysmic event too many. Most of us in the middle class are only two to three paychecks away from being homeless.

The statistics on homeless workers are startling. Almost 60% of the homeless men in Cincinnati both have high school diplomas and work at least part time. Georgine Getty educated me about one work trap that homeless men encounter, day labor halls. There are several day labor halls in Cincinnati with names like "Labor Solutions" and "Labor Works." Interested men, usually homeless can arrive at these halls at 4:00AM in the morning. After waiting for three hours they will be selected for work that day, perhaps cleaning a stadium or sorting recyclables. They are hired for the day based on favoritism and anyone who causes any problems or asks any questions is listed as DNR "Do Not Return" and will not be rehired.

They are taken on unsafe, unheated buses to work sites, work 8 – 12 hours, are brought back to headquarters and wait another three hours for their checks. At this point it is 8PM or 9PM. Most of these men do not have checking accounts because they are homeless and must pay a check cashing place, which charges a fee, to cash their checks. The day labor hall also takes fees; \$6 for transportation to the site, \$2 for use of any safety equipment, money for child support. After standing in line and working for 12 – 16 hours these men receive pay checks for less than the minimum wage, in Cincinnati. This horrifies me.

⁵ Greater Cincinnati Coalition for the Homeless, *Homelessness Facts*.

The Greater Cincinnati Coalition for the Homeless has taken their concerns to City Council in the hopes of getting legislation passed to regulate day labor halls. Apparently this has been done in Chicago and it was very successful. Ms. Getty explained to me that she and her organization are uncertain if the large employers who use the day labor halls even know what is happening.

She told me about a meeting she had with Councilmember Bortz, who was familiar with day labor halls, and the fact that his former employer used them, and paid \$16 an hour for the labor. She told me that he was angry when she informed him most of the laborers received more like \$6.00 an hour. He felt like the day labor halls misrepresented themselves to large employers and is now working with Council Member Crowley to draft legislation to limit day labor halls. Getty also told me that as much as she has tried, she can't figure out who runs the local day labor halls, and this is the same story in Tennessee and Kentucky. They are like a pyramid scheme with no top and no accountability, and no justice. "She and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and the needy." Getty is very pleased with the progress that Bortz and Crowley are making and is looking forward to the impending legislation.

There are other factors involved in homelessness. Nationally somewhere between 25% - 50% of women and children are fleeing situations of domestic violence (the local reported number is 12%).⁶ Almost ¼ of the homeless population struggles with major mental illness.⁷ 40% of homeless men are veterans.⁸ 20% of the homeless in Cincinnati struggle with addiction.⁹ And African Americans make up 68% of Cincinnati's homeless (a number significantly higher than that of African Americans in the local population). Homelessness is like a who's who of our unresolved major social problems; low wages, limited affordable housing, domestic violence, racism, addiction, mental illness, veterans living with injury or post-traumatic stress. Bob Moore explained to me that if we as individuals or congregants work on anything related to these problems, raising the minimum wage, subsidized day care, increased health coverage, we have done something to improve homelessness. It's that connected.

And there are alternatives. In the last ten years permanent supportive housing has become popular, even among conservatives. This type of housing is for the chronically homeless, those on the streets for years, the people thrown out of every shelter, or unable to get in because they can't get sober. Getty explained to me that conservatives got on board with this idea after they learned about "Million Dollar Murray." Murray was a homeless, former Marine and addict living in Reno, Nevada. Two of his closest contacts were local Officers Johns and O'Bryan, who regularly brought Murray in because he was found passed out on the street, which is standard procedure in any town. Individuals found passed out are either arrested, or sent to detox, or the emergency room if they are too inebriated to be safe in police custody (literally too sick with alcohol to go without medical care).

⁶ NCH, Fact Sheet #1.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Greater Cincinnati Coalition for the Homeless, Homelessness Facts.

⁹ Ibid.

As Officer Johns explained “I’ve been a police officer for 15 years. I picked up Murray my whole life. Literally.”¹⁰ At some point Johns and O’Bryan, who really liked Murray, contacted hospitals and detox centers where he had been taken for the ten years he was in Reno. By their estimates, Murray cost Reno and its tax payers over \$100,000 a year. He was the most expensive local homeless individual they knew. But they also calculated that two other homeless individuals in one year cost the city \$65,000 and \$50,000 respectively. In the ten years Murray was in Reno they estimate that he cost the city \$1 million. As Officer O’Bryan put it “It cost us one million dollars not to do something about Murray.”

This is where permanent supportive housing comes in. This will not solve homelessness at all levels, but it is specifically geared to the chronically homeless, those struggling with mental illness and/or addiction. At the moment there is a proposal to place a 40 unit permanent supportive housing building in Avondale. The model has been tried nationwide and has been largely successful, including in Columbus and Cleveland. Homeless individuals are given a key and an apartment. They can continue to drink, but are not permitted to engage in any illegal activity on site – no prostitution, buying or selling drugs or weapons, or shooting up. They can do this elsewhere, but not on site. Unlike shelters, people who continue to drink can live here.

The facility is staffed 24/7 with individuals trained in mental health and addiction. Any day they are interested, residents are given the opportunity to enter programs and get sober, and keep their apartments. It is essentially a harm reduction model. Getty told me that they did a focus group on homeless people in Over the Rhine, where many shelters are located, and the participants said they would be interested in the units being placed in Avondale, where there is green space and they could garden or mow the lawn, have some pride in their apartment and the little plot of land outside of it.

And just in case you think this a pie in the sky liberal plan, permanent supportive housing has a national treatment success rate of 80%. The discovery is this; addicts can not stop drinking to move into a shelter. There is not enough stability. But they can stop drinking when given a stable place to live. They can stay on their meds when given a stable place to live. In fact, many ultimately find work. I spoke with Donald Whitehead, former Executive Director of the local and national chapter of the Coalition for the Homeless, born in Avondale, and a man who lived as a homeless person. He is working to get the units built. He told me that the state government has the money for this project, is supportive of the need and purpose, and that there is hope that around 2008, 40 units of permanent supportive housing will be built in Avondale. I eagerly await that day and told him to call me if he needs a Reverend to put in a good word at a hearing. I also told him that our members are eager letter writers if that is ever required.

And as hopeful as this is, it does not eradicate homelessness, nor does it stop the spread of homelessness among children and families. When I went to Mt. Auburn Presbyterian Church to watch them host IHN guests I struggled inside while silently watching mothers and their children, women like me, live in rotating congregations. I will never forget the mother who told me she felt really badly that she couldn’t always find a place to bathe her children. She was doing everything she could, keeping her family together, sending her kids to school, following the rules of IHN, living in congregational basements, and being homeless leads to these moments of indignity and

¹⁰ *New Yorker*, (Feb 2006).

injustice. It was at that moment I realized it isn't a privilege, but a right to get clean. We also become undignified and unjust if we participate in this system and do nothing to make it different because as our 7th principle informs us, we are all part of the interdependent web of life. We stand together or we fall apart.

I am grateful that we are housing IHN guests. I am gratified to learn more and serve. If you work with our IHN guests I encourage you to bring the attitude of respectful service. You are here to serve food, to clean up, to answer questions about towels, not to pry or give advice (I am going to hurt the first person who gives advice – think of your favorite President of the United States sleeping and working in our basement) or even look for conversation (unless it is sought out), but to quietly assist. This is not an easy match for Unitarian Universalists. We like to be in control, to act, to talk, to advise. Enhance your faith life and watch, listen with quietness, kindness and respect, and serve, and in the future we will talk about what we learned together after our guests have left, and what else we might want to do.

I know that many IHN guests are ambivalent about the program, but as one mother said to me “It beats the alternative.” Getty told me that she has this continual conversation with one of her Board members. He begins “Shelters are good.” She replies “They are band aids.” He says “Band aids stop bleeding.” She says “We should stop hurting people in the first place.” There is much to do, much to learn, and ways we can make a difference. I look forward to being part of the solution. May it always be so.