

Encounters For Eternity:
Engaging, Evaluating, Encouraging, Embracing & Evangelizing
The Homeless and The Poor in Bethesda's Neighborhood

Respectfully submitted to Bethesda Church Council on February 26, 2024

Bethesda's recent encounters with the homeless have shone a spotlight on a very old problem that has recently reasserted itself in ways that are more obvious and upsetting than we have known in our lifetimes. Nevertheless, extreme poverty has been a perennial feature of fallen humanity. Jesus himself told us this. "You will always have the poor among you," he said bluntly, "but you will not always have me" (John 12:8). Jesus' statement was in response Judas' grumbling about a wasted opportunity to show kindness to the poor. But as John relates, Judas was not concerned about the poor. He was thinking only of himself.

The homeless are coming to our doors. They have crossed the threshold. They have broken things. They have even camped out in the building. Recently one young woman entered the sanctuary noticeably intoxicated and mocked the preacher. We have legitimate concerns about safety, lack of capacity, and disruption. We all feel discomfort and even fear in the presence of people who are unknown and unpredictable, who don't look like us, act like us, or smell like us. This anxiety is perfectly human. Nevertheless, the truth is that those who come to us are only the tip of the iceberg. They are the visible reminder that there is a much bigger problem out there that affects hundreds of thousands of people in Canada who may or may not have a place to live, and whose poverty may or may not be their fault.

The urgent question is: **What are we to do with those who come to our door?** This paper is a first attempt at an answer.

As with everything else, we must start with the Bible.

A Theology of Suffering and Compassion

Even a passing familiarity with the Bible will alert anyone to what it says about how Christians are to treat the poor and the oppressed. A closer study of the Scriptures will provide greater nuance and greater inspiration, but also a greater conviction that God expects radically selfless behaviour of his people that flows out of a transformed heart: we are not only to care for the poor but to identify with them; we are not only to welcome them but to embrace rejection as a shared inheritance; we are not only to preach the Gospel but to live it out as we "consider others better than ourselves" (Phil 2:3).

At first glance, Old Testament figures like Abraham, Moses, and David seem like men occupying the centre of power. But they spent significant time on the fringes, spending years wandering about without a place to call home, often seeming strange and even threatening to their contemporaries. The Old Testament prophets likewise accepted the necessity of living life on the fringes of society in order to call out Israel's idolatry, which invariably expressed itself as injustice, or at least as wilful ignorance of the needs of the poor.

If the Old Testament allows for a degree of ambiguity regarding the status of the wealthy and the poor, it's impossible to miss the New Testament's commands to live sacrificially in order to provide for those who have less than we do.

Jesus' compassion is renowned. But Jesus did more than just help the poor. He was poor himself. During the three years of his teaching and healing ministry, while he regularly challenged the callous hypocrisy of those who were proud of their piety and generosity (Matt 6:2), Jesus himself did not have a home. As he said, "the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" (Matt 8:20). Luke tells us that he and the Twelve relied on the generosity of some of his more well-off female disciples (8:3).

Not only this, Jesus did and said things that people found strange and alarming. Many thought he was demon-possessed (John 7:20) and his own family worried that he was out of his mind (Mark 3:21). And, while he was perfectly justified in doing so, taking a whip to the money-changers in the Temple was not only disruptive, it was violent (John 2:13-16). So it's no surprise that Jesus was viewed with suspicion in the Temple, and duly warned his followers that they would be "flogged" and "put out of the synagogue", that they would be "hated" so much that "everyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God" (Matt 10:17,22; John 16:2).

Jesus' brother James commanded the churches not to treat anyone less honourably because of their "shabby clothes" (2:1-4) and later excoriated them for "hoarding wealth" and for living in "luxury and self-indulgence" (5:1-5). Paul told the Galatians that James, along with Peter and John, personally commanded him to "remember the poor" as he carried out his ministry to the Gentiles which, he affirmed, "was the very thing I was eager to do" (2:10). The concern for the poor by these church "pillars" was perfectly plain in each of their own writings as well. John asks pointedly, "If anyone has material possessions, and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?" Then he exhorts his "dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth"! (1 John 3:17-18)

A History of Compassion

While compassion is a feature all humans share, it is usually limited to the people you understand and respect, people you consider to be more or less on your level. The early Christians – and Jews before them – shocked the world with their over the top generosity. Mostly poor themselves they gave freely to those who had no reason to expect it of them. They would even fast from what little food they had so that they might give it to those who had even less than they did. Such efforts won the grudging respect even of Julian the Apostate, a Roman emperor who had turned his back on the Christian faith in which he had been raised: "no Jew ever has to beg, and the impious Galileans [i.e. Christians] support not only their own poor but ours as well". But as popular secular historian Tom Holland's recent book, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*, recounts, most of Julian's peers were repulsed rather than impressed by the "empty-headed" Christians. Of prevailing pagan attitudes towards the poor, Holland writes, "The heroes of the Iliad had scorned the weak and downtrodden. So too [...] had philosophers. The starving deserved no sympathy. Beggars were best rounded up and deported. Pity risked undermining a wise man's self-control. Only fellow citizens of good character who, through no fault of their own, had fallen on evil days might reasonably merit assistance." (p.139) The early Christians' counter-cultural selflessness is well-documented. And it was hugely influential. According to Holland, regardless of

whether someone nowadays rejects the Christian faith, it is nevertheless Jesus who shaped their conscience.

Sadly, sacrificial giving has always been the exception rather than the rule – even in so-called “Christian countries”. In the modern West, increasing numbers have found themselves living in cities in unstable and at times squalid conditions. Barbara Murphy documents an (all too brief) Canadian exception to this reality in her book, *The Ugly Canadians: The Rise and Fall of a Caring Society*. This 1999 book details how the social programs that helped Canadians in the lowest income brackets came to be, and how beginning in the 1970’s they have been increasingly taken away. Her pessimistic summary: “Following the shock of the Great Depression we spent over 40 years caring about each other [...] The years of compassion are over.” (p. 11)

To put it another way, for a handful of decades there was less poverty, or at least it was better hidden. We came to expect that the government and the police were handling it, since they kept the poor out of sight and out of mind. The recent explosion of desperation all over North America has caught everyone off guard. It shouldn’t have. In addition to cuts to social programs, the turn away from belief in God and the subsequent despair in our society are contributing factors to a growing mental health and drug crisis.

Christians became complacent. We, too, grew dependent on the government. Rightly or wrongly, the government no longer has the resources on offer that it once did. We Christians certainly don’t have the same expectations of ourselves that we once did. Nevertheless, we still have the same mandate.

The Calling: Obedience

Unlike the secular authors quoted above, our main interest is neither history nor politics, but obedience to God. **So, what is God calling us to?**

Before jumping to any conclusions, it may be helpful to consider two well-intentioned but flawed approaches in recent months.

“Stone” Church in St. John, NB: <https://sjhdc.ca/can-churches-double-as-homeless-shelters-a-response-based-on-a-painful-experience/>

St. Mary’s Church in Saskatoon, SK: <https://saskatoon.ctvnews.ca/this-saskatoon-church-congregation-fought-to-keep-junkies-away-from-the-building-1.6618857>

From the first example we should learn that it does no good to take on more than wisdom and prudence allow.

That said, from the second example we should learn that too much “hardening” of church buildings can lead to the hardening of our hearts.

Shutting out or ignoring the poor is antithetical to the Gospel. It is disobedient to the Lord Jesus Christ’s explicit command (John 15:12-13; 1 John 4:21). It stands in opposition to his method and message.

The Strategy: Engage, Evaluate, Encourage, Embrace, Evangelize

Nevertheless, there are realities in the modern world that are different from other times and places. Street drugs are a real threat. We have a responsibility protect the vulnerable among us from anyone who

may be violent. However, the more we are proactive and open instead of passive and fearful, the more we will be able to fulfill our calling while looking also to preserve the safety of the whole congregation. Moreover, if we pray with expectancy, if we begin to see each encounter with a desperate soul as an opportunity from God, if we shun despair and trust that he will do the work of soul transformation, he will be glorified: he will pour out his provision for us and he himself will guard our fellowship.

I am suggesting the development of a rotating **Usher Team** (four people each Sunday) to do much more than simply take the morning offering. **The Usher Team will receive training** in communicating with the homeless and drug addicted, etc. They will take the lead to:

Engage: Greet all visitors at the Cambridge St entrance, speaking warmly to everyone regardless of appearance.

Evaluate: Assess whether a visitor is intoxicated or clearly a threat. If they are not, ask how we can help them. Invite them to join us in the service or for a meal. Give them bus tickets or a grocery card if that is what they are seeking. (Grocery cards and bus tickets should be stocked and available to the Usher Team and pastors. Budget for Benevolence Fund may need to be reviewed.)

Encourage: Direct visitors appropriately. Make expectations clear: anyone entering the building must be willing to sit with the rest of the congregation. If they are intoxicated or disruptive, they will be asked to leave. Take appropriate actions to ensure congregational safety if they refuse to follow these simple rules. When activities are over, take the initiative to make sure all visitors have left the building.

Embrace: Welcome anyone who is willing to come and participate in the activities of the church. Seek to get to know them. Take time with them. Treat them as an honoured guest.

Evangelize: Share the Gospel! Offer to pray for them! Ask if they can sit with them during the service. Introduce them to a pastor or another spiritually mature believer after the service is over.

While the Usher Team will take the lead and be comprised of people who are especially interested in this kind of ministry, it should be emphasized that compassion towards the poor is still the responsibility of every disciple of Jesus Christ!

As I stated above, this document is just a first attempt at a response prompted by our recent encounters with the homeless based on a re-evaluation of what the Scriptures teach about ministry to the poor, and informed more broadly by a review of recent news items and church history. The expectation undergirding this approach is that God will keep his promises, and that we will honour a people who honours his Word. Nevertheless, I expect that it may provoke some strong reactions. I welcome any opportunity to dialogue, especially when there are genuine safety concerns. It will be essential to talk and pray through such an important topic!

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