

Vineyard Church of Ann Arbor December 2 & 3, 2006 Homeless Ministry Report

For the next 20 minutes or so, I would like to share some facts, some pictures, and some stories about a ministry that is dear to my heart. It has changed my life and the lives of others around me. Hopefully, when I am through, you will be a little more informed, a lot more compassionate and with any luck, a bit convicted.

According to the most recent statistics, 2,756 people will experience homelessness within a year in Washtenaw County. An estimated 41 people will become homeless within a given week. Today alone, there are approximately 664 homeless persons in Washtenaw County. Tonight, when the low will reach 19 degrees and we are all snuggled in our warm beds, some of those persons will be sleeping in a bed at the shelter, at a local church, a motel, or on a friend's couch. Others will be sleeping in a chair at the warming shelter. And many will find themselves sleeping in a place not intended for sleeping. Sleeping in a tent, a car, on a porch, in a doorway, under an overpass.

Homelessness does not discriminate. Many of us are one paycheck, an illness or an accident away from being homeless. The main causes of homelessness are lack of affordable housing, insufficient income, or lack of health or supportive services. In Washtenaw County, the majority of the homeless community is male with an average age of 40. 26% of the persons who are homeless are families with children. 1/3 are employed, either part or full time. 28% have a high school diploma and another 34% have at least some college education. 23% are veterans. 44% have a substance abuse problem, and 42% have a mental illness. 46% have some type of chronic health condition.

Jesus characterized his own earthly ministry by service to the poor, the outcasts, and the downtrodden. Early in his public ministry, Jesus entered the synagogue and read from the prophet Isaiah to describe his ministry: *The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from the darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.* Christ represents himself to us in a special way in the hungry, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner. He is among us in the outcasts and the oppressed of our age. The very Christ who suffered and died on the cross that all might be reconciled to God is crucified again and again in the suffering and death of poor and hungry people.

In following the example of Jesus and the doctrine of the early church, we as a church have a responsibility to care for the poor, for the lost, for the sick and brokenhearted in our community. So in June of this year, with a small amount of seed money, a partnership with Food Gatherers, and a limited amount of training, The Vineyard Homeless Ministry officially started. Eight of us, our only

qualifications being our love and obedience to Jesus, headed for the streets of Ann Arbor. With backpacks filled with food bags, we went out in teams to previously targeted areas to offer food, prayer and fellowship to those in need. After 3 hours of walking our first night out, the 16 bags of food we distributed was equal to the number of sore feet in the group. Within two weeks, we had our locations narrowed down, with Liberty Plaza being our main gathering point, and we had doubled the number of bags distributed. Since then, we have expanded our ministry to include sharing a hot meal, usually pizza, soda, and coffee, along with the bagged non-perishables. We give away supplies such as blankets, coats, hats, gloves, socks, toilet paper, and backpacks. We have also filled individual requests for things such as a tent, fuel oil, a mattress, a clock, a radio, and a bike. Today, five months into the ministry, we give away an average of 65 meals a week, along with all the other supplies. We have over 20 team members, with an average of 10 going out each Friday.

While those numbers are impressive, they are only a small piece of what this ministry is all about. We seek to build a ministry committed to service, justice and respect. Our ministry is ultimately centered around the Gospel principles of love, understanding, forgiveness, compassion and repentance. The biggest gift we can give is the love of Jesus. And that is what we try to do each Friday. We don't just hand out food; we give out hugs, prayers, a listening ear. We don't seek to fix or repair. We love them right where they are at. And the giving is not a one-way transaction. We receive even more from our new friends than we can ever hope to give them. We too receive hugs, prayers, a listening ear. And we are loved right back.

And numbers don't tell the entire story. Here are just a few snapshots of the lives that have been touched through our ministry:

The first friend we met was a Vietnam Vet. Always wearing his backpack, a pair of sunglasses, and a smile, he was our "consultant". He told us the wants and needs of those out on the streets. He spread the word to others about our new ministry. A lover of Jesus, he always encouraged our works. When the weather turned cold, he moved out west, but we'll be sure to catch up with him when his returns in the spring.

Within the first few weeks of our ministry, an older gentleman, also a Vet, exclaimed in amazement that he couldn't believe we kept coming back. He thanked us for keeping our word. And now, he waits expectantly for us every Friday and gets worried if we are even a few minutes late.

After passing out the food and supplies, we have time to visit with everyone. Sometimes we have a lot of quick chats, other times, we spend the entire evening talking to one person. We talk about the weather, the Tigers, the latest movie, the economy. But we also talk about the need for a warmer jacket or a sleeping bag with the weather turning colder, that the police had torn their camp

apart the other day so they were looking for a new place to sleep, that they were having trouble sleeping lately because their sister had been killed last week. We heard about being in pain because they were kicked in the ribs last night, the need for a new tent because someone had burnt theirs down, their desire to be sober but their inability to do so. Mostly we just listen. Sometimes, like with the coat or the tent, we are able to help out. Often we pray. And always we hug.

While we start out our night in the park, our last stop of the evening is usually to one of the camps. We quickly fell in love with the group staying in the woods. Within a few visits, we were given the full tour of their camps, and are now invited to view every new redecoration project. Our time at their camp is always filled with laughter and hugs. Holding a special place in our hearts, we always pack their bags with extra love and goodies.

Many of the people we see week after week, others show up only occasionally. When a regular shows up missing for awhile, we start asking around, reminding others to let them know we miss them. When they show up again it's like a homecoming. Lots of hugs mixed in with a gentle reprimand for making us worry. Often, when they get permanent housing we never see them again. It's a bittersweet event, because although housing is one of the goals, we still love them and miss seeing them.

Earlier this summer, a family started coming to the park. Dad, mom, two young boys. Dad was stand-offish. So was mom. The family got kicked out of the hotel and moved into a tent. We started bringing extra treats for the boys – clothes donated by a co-worker, toys. Slowly but surely everyone started thawing out. The boys joined us in the prayer circle first. Hugs and words of encouragement were given to the family. Dad started talking, smiling. Mom started confiding her needs. Soon the entire family was in the prayer circle. The day the family moved into housing was our big praise. We haven't seen them in over a month but we thank God for the favor He has given them and we continue to keep them in our prayers.

Early in the ministry, there was a guy who would show up at the park for the food, but that was about it. He was angry, he didn't want to talk to us, eye contact didn't exist, and a hug was out of the question. But we didn't push anything on him, just kept talking to him in love every week. Slowly but surely, he thawed out, started talking. Before you knew it he was accepting hugs. Then he was initiating them. The anger was mostly gone, replaced by a sadness, so we hugged him and loved him even more. The difference in a few months was incredible. We figured he had just warmed up to us, but others told us that he was different to everyone now. Today he is off the streets and in an apartment.

Shopping for low cost supplies has always been an experience. A good portion of the food we get from Food Gatherers – some free, some low cost. Every week our selection is different, but it never fails to feel like Christmas as we are filling

up our cart. Other items we get from the Dollar Stores, garage sales, resale shops, donation bins like those in our lobby. We have taken up collections at our places of employment, picked up food from local restaurants. Cash donations have been given by our employers, in-kind donations from other churches.

Earlier this fall, we had our first cold and rainy Friday. We headed out with our supplies just sure that we wouldn't see many people and would end up dropping all the pizza off at the shelter. We drove up to see the park empty, with one bicycle being the sole occupant. Just as we thought – they had all stayed somewhere dry. But turning the corner, we were rewarded for our faithfulness. Over 60 people were standing under the awning of the neighboring building, waiting for our arrival. After helping us unload the van, one of the guys told us that people had said we wouldn't show up in this bad weather, but he kept assuring them that we had promised to always be there. Our group prayer that night ended with shouts of joy from everyone.

One of our new friends had a recent setback. His clothing had been stolen from the shelter and then he was jumped late one evening. Most of his remaining possessions were taken and the clothes he had on were ruined. We met him the next morning at the Kiwanis Garage Sale and bought him some new pants and socks. Then the following day we brought more clothes to him at the Shelter. In between tears, he told us that although he grew up in the church, and has been to many churches since then, we are the first church, the first Christians, through which he has truly experienced the love of Jesus.

Our favorite part of every Friday evening is the group prayer. Shortly before we leave each location, we circle up for a prayer, led by a member of our team. When we first started going out, only a few people would get in the prayer circle. We would pray a short prayer and then leave. Now we have up to 30 people in that circle. Prayer time is longer. People who wouldn't even think of joining us before now remind us to pray and add their prayer requests. We are constantly expanding the circle to get the last straggler in. And the evening ends how it begins, hugs for all.

On Thanksgiving, we spent the day like most everyone else does, eating a good home-cooked meal with our "family", watching the football games, playing cards, talking, napping, eating some more. Our family get-together this year was over 70 large and was held at the church. We ate 7 turkeys, 6 hams, 30 pies, and all the fixins. We ran a constant shuttle to the church from downtown and all points in between. Some of our new family came to help cook, others stayed to help clean. Most came just to have a time to eat and hang out. It's a toss up as to who enjoyed the day the most – the hosts or the guests. A friend of mine, a non-believer, who had spent the entire day and the evening before helping, remarked to several people before he left that it was the best Thanksgiving he ever had. And many of our guests said the same thing. A week later, we are still running into people who spent the day with us who are thanking us for inviting them.

While the ministry was intended for us to help others, we quickly realized Jesus had other plans. We find that we are often blessed more often than those we bless. One of our team members who thought she was just going to stay back at the church and pray for us tried going out with us once and now rarely misses a Friday. When my mom was in the hospital this summer, many of my new friends offered prayers and words of comfort. If one of us misses a Friday, everyone is concerned and asks after us. We have made new friendships both with the team members and with those we serve. Friday is the highlight of the week for all of us. If we find ourselves tired or cranky at the end of our work week, five minutes at the park is the best medicine. Our faith, our compassion, and our love for others has grown. We have learned to put things in perspective. In helping others we ourselves have been healed.

One of our volunteers made this comment: "I have been deeply touched by the new relationships that I've formed while being a part of the ministry. I've made new friends both within the ministry team and within the homeless community but more importantly, I have seen what 'true faith' really is as some of my homeless friends have an enduring and unending faith in God that I can only hope to achieve. Meanwhile, I have seen firsthand what God's compassion can do and what a profound impact it can have, both on the givers and the receivers, even in just a few hours a week. I truly look forward to our weekly outings as each is uniquely educational in impacting my spiritual life as well as humbling in my secular life."

Every Friday after making our runs and cleaning out the van, a group of us heads to Denny's to wind down, grab a bite to eat, and talk about the evenings events. We sit in the same place at the same time and have the same server. And we're not exactly quiet when talking about the evening and sharing our joy with all we come in contact with. A while back, the manager of the restaurant came up to us and thanked us for what we are doing. It was truly awesome to be able to share our ministry with her. Little did we know we would be rewarded as well – we now get the employee discount on our meals every Friday night.

I think what this team member shared with me sums it all up: "When I first started with the ministry I was very scared about what to say to these guys and how to relate to them, I was so surprised at how open they were to us and actually found it really easy to sit and chat with them. I have never felt unsafe or uneasy when out with them and really understand now why Jesus wanted to spend time with these people.

The more time I spend with these guys the more my love for them grows and I keep thinking this must be God doing his stuff and God using us for his purpose here on earth.

I think the ministry should come with a warning, you can't just do this on a Friday

because the more you get to know these guys the more time you spend thinking and praying for them in the week, they really are friends you really care about.”

Interested in getting involved in the ministry? Here’s how you can help. Come join us on Friday nights for our Street Outreach. Help shop for supplies during the week. Be a part of the packing team on Thursday afternoons. Help sort donations. Join us for special events such as Holiday meals and Movie nights. Make a financial or in-kind donation to the ministry.

Want to do something on your own? Read the book “Under the Overpass”. Donate to a local food bank. Help serve a meal at the Salvation Army. Take your kids. Organize a blanket drive at your place of employment. When you encounter a homeless person on the street, don’t pass them by. Say hello. Ask them how they are. Buy them a meal.