

Not a One-Night Stand

Reaching the Homeless and Marginalized

Karen Vannoy and John Flowers

Throughout our ministry we have coordinated mission work and supported local cooperative efforts. Our volunteers would go to the mission site, cook and serve pancakes or sandwiches, escort folks through clothes closets, and sometimes stay overnight with people who had no homes of their own. These were valuable ministries, done by committed Christians. Yet gradually we have come to understand they were lacking a crucial component: community.

The servant relationship of the New Testament is meant to be lived out day to day in community, not occasionally as a one-night stand. We know how to give things to the poor but we do not know how to be in deep, mutual relationship with the poor. We know how to be polite across racial and ethnic lines, but we don't know how to share our lives. We fall short of the *metanoia*

called for in the gospel, so eleven o'clock on Sunday morning remains the most segregated hour of the week not just racially, but socioeconomically and educationally as well.

Is This Your Congregation?

Do the following characterize the missionary spirit in your church?

We give money. A cardboard sign at an intersection reads "Will work for food, God Bless!" It tugs at the heart and so we give money. It assuages our middle-class guilt, even though we know it doesn't change a life. Those who live deep inside the world of poverty say cardboard sign carriers are nearly always working a

scam. Giving money not only produces a false sense of satisfaction; it perpetuates the system keeping the poor dependent on the handout.

We do drive-by charity. We bag up groceries for the “less fortunate” and after the grocery handoff, the giver returns home feeling generous and compassionate, while the recipient family eats alone, wondering why dignity and respect are harder to find than a holiday meal. We do mission work in the ghettos and return to our gated neighborhoods. We tutor in underprivileged schools but won’t let our own children attend there. Most mission work shares one thing in common: we can leave, so we stay in our positions of power.

We give off the wrong messages. We are the haves and you are the have nots. We are not as broken as you are. We feel sorry for you. We have made something of ourselves and you have not. We want to help but we want you to be grateful. These are the messages that make true community impossible. Rather we are to minister with the poor as if they were Jesus himself, and we cannot do so with such messages.

Mutual Transformation

The goal of our ministry in San Antonio is now mutual transformation, and we work toward it through three pathways. The first two are for those who struggle with homelessness, chemical abuse, or untreated mental illness. The third pathway is directed at the “respectables,” you and me.

Our transformation lies in leaving our protective bubbles of social isolation. People are changed in worship by standing in the same breadline with the poor on Communion Sunday. People are transformed by working in a medical clinic that focuses on relationships instead of just medical treatment and by food programs that focus on conversation instead of a serving line.

Real transformation happens when we realize the poor have as much to give us as we have to give them. They often have a hunger for studying the Bible that our

own congregations have lost. They have a realness about them that our churches need.

From Handout to Ministry

Here’s how we began to move from handouts to ministry.

Begin with prayer. Gather together a group of laity and maintain a daily prayer practice that begins with awareness. Look for the hidden people in your own routine: the ones who clean your streets and take away your garbage, the ones you see on the sidewalks each day with packs on their backs, the ones who check you out at the grocery store and wash your car. Make eye contact; smile; say good morning. Learn their names. At the end of each day, record who and what you saw, and just sit in silence with the information. Ask God to direct your reflection. God will show the way to minister with the poor and marginalized. Visit other church mission programs and look for mutuality, respect, and community. Listen as if you were the receiver not the giver.

Eat with the poor. One older adult from our church received a call asking “I want to make you lunch this week. When should I bring it by?” His response was “Whatever day you have time to stay and eat it with me.” There is no greater practice of true community in the New Testament than eating together. We are talking about much more than providing a meal. The poor and homeless are used to standing in food lines; what they aren’t used to is receiving from people who want to know them. Find people in your church who are interested in sharing a meal around a table with the poor and marginalized every week. Put flyers out in bus stations, free clinics, and community centers. Go door to door and stick with it; over time they will come. The gospel is about breaking bread together.

Hear their stories. One businessman told about a homeless man that lingered near his office doorway. We call him guitar

man because he plays the guitar all the time. What in the world can I do for him? What can I say? Ask his name. In order to hear his story, it would help to know his name. It’s simple to train volunteers for this ministry: Treat the poor like any new person in your life. Where are you from? Are you married or have children? What do you like to do? If they are homeless, ask: How long have you been on the streets? What do you miss most about life before the streets? Where did you grow up? Tell me about your family. Where did you sleep last night? Where did you eat?

Share power. Poor and marginalized people know the radical inequity of power in our culture. We cannot change everything overnight, but we must do our best to equalize power in relationships. The poor can teach you the way if you let them. As an example, what makes our medical clinic unique is that our physicians serve the poor while the poor teach physicians

Are you open to being a pastor to the poor without rescuing them or judging them?

about the streets. The homeless at Travis Park now have a neighborhood council that establishes

guidelines for acceptable behavior and names consequences for those who struggle with boundaries. The poor and homeless need to know their own gifts as much as you do, and they need validation of their own life experiences.

Be wise as a serpent and gentle as a dove. Manipulation is a survival skill for the poor and marginalized. They are better at it than most of us are. We never give out money—no exceptions. But we regularly provide a few hours work to earn what they need. Don’t be dictated to, but become a part of the problem solving that lets them accomplish what they need without a handout.

Worship together. If we want diversity in worship, we must be open to change. Begin by viewing worship through the eyes of the poor or uneducated. How do people dress in your church? What is the reading level of your liturgy? Is your preaching filled with church words? The nondenominational churches have been reaching the poor for the last fifty years, so the practices of worship for the poor

are often much different than ours. There is no more important place to experience diversity than in worship, but it won't happen just on our terms.

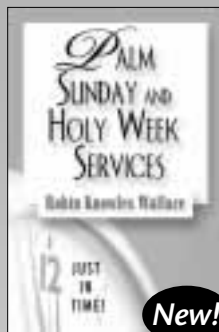
Think indigenously. Use Aggressive Pursuit. We must give up the notion that poor and marginalized persons will come to our churches through invitation only. We aggressively pursue poor and marginalized people for worship, saying things like: "I want you to worship with me today. I don't know if you need to come to worship or not but I need you there. I cannot be all God has called me to be without you." Find out what the barriers are to their attendance. Is it a lack of transportation? Would our Sunday school classes interest them?

Are you open to being a pastor to the poor without rescuing them or judging them? All over our country the urban areas are being repopulated. Scores of those who once fled the inner city are now seeking the diversity found in the downtown landscape. With God's help, we can play an important role in the new urban frontier. □



KAREN VANNOY and JOHN FLOWERS are co-pastors of Travis Park United Methodist Church in San Antonio, Texas.

Timely Reading



New! Palm Sunday and Holy Week Services, by Robin Knowles Wallace. Provides ready-to-use lectionary-based worship and preaching resources for Palm Sunday and Holy Week. Abingdon Press. ZP1-9780687497782. Paper, **\$9.50**



Sharing the Easter Faith with Children: Helping Children Observe Lent and Celebrate Easter, by Carolyn C. Brown. Abingdon Press. ZP1-9780687344246. Paper, **\$18.00**



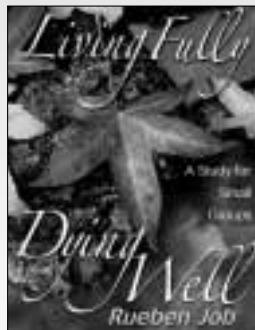
Season of Ash and Fire: Prayers and Liturgies for Lent and Easter, by Blair Gilmer Meeks. Provides corporate prayers for each Sunday and Holy Day in the Easter Cycle. Abingdon Press. ZP1-9780687044542. Paper, **\$13.00**



Prayers for Lent, Easter, and Pentecost, by Donna E. Schaper. A wealth of prayers & litanies for the Lent/Easter season. Abingdon Press. ZP1-9780687343065. Paper, **\$12.00**



Sermon Seeds: 40 Creative Sermon Starters, by Dottie Escobedo-Frank. Abingdon Press. ZP1-9780687331710. Paper with CD-ROM, **\$20.00**



Living Fully, Dying Well, by Rueben Job. Assists in making careful, wise and prayerful preparation for meeting life's most important moments.. Abingdon Press. ZP1-9780687335855. **Planning Kit:** teaching guide, participant's book, 3 booklets for congregational use, and a DVD. **\$69.95** ZP1-9780687466405. **Participant Book. \$8.95**

Published by **Abingdon Press**

CIR76610043 PACP00362966-01

store, web, phone
Cokesbury.com | 1.800.672.1789

