



“What Should We Do About Henry?”

Charles M. Wood and Ellen Blue

Sandra Owens had just been appointed to Redeemer, a mostly white, middle-class congregation with an average of thirty-five in worship. The church was in a large city, but not in or near the inner city. The building was bordered on three sides by businesses, with a small residential neighborhood across the street. The sanctuary would seat only about seventy comfortably, and in its forty-year history there had been only one or two years when the church had had a regular attendance that approached that number. This was in large part due to the church's very poor location. It was hidden away, hard to find, in a neighborhood cut off from most of the city by highways and other barriers. Further, a much larger church of its denomination was just a few miles away.

When the chair of the Staff-Parish Relations (SPR) Committee called to welcome her to Redeemer and invite her to a get-acquainted meeting with some of the members, she told Sandra, “Now, one thing I need to tell you about is Henry. Henry is a homeless man who's sort of adopted our church — or we've adopted him — anyway, he lives outside. When you drive up, he may be outside the building, so don't be startled. He's harmless.”

When Sandra attended that meeting, Henry was not at the church, but was off on one of his daily excursions around the neighborhood. After the main meeting, the SPR Chair and the Chair of the Administrative Council had a private conversation with Sandra, and one topic that came up was Henry. It turned

out that there was a good deal of dissension among the membership (and disagreement between those two important leaders) about him. They said that several months previously, on a weekday, there had been a small fire in a Sunday school room. Some members blamed Henry for setting it; while others credited him with having saved the building by scaring off intruders who had set it. Some members were convinced that Henry kept vandalism to a minimum by scaring or warning off neighborhood youngsters who might do damage. Others felt that Henry himself was a source of damage.

The pastor Sandra replaced had had a nervous breakdown and taken early retirement, and did not provide the kind of background information that a new pastor might expect. When Sandra brought the matter up in her next conversation with the regional executive, he offered no suggestions or support.

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Sandra's first Administrative Council meeting occurred just a couple of weeks after she arrived. The board wanted Sandra's opinion on what they should do about Henry, and she got the impression that they were hoping she would

tell them authoritatively what to do. She stated that while she was a firm believer in the church's responsibility to those who needed help, including the homeless, she did not know enough yet about this particular, obviously complicated, situation to offer an opinion. She asked for time, until the next board meeting (which would be held in about two months), to investigate and to reflect.

Because Henry was often gone when Sandra was at the church, her encounters with him were limited; in fact, he seemed to go out of his way to avoid her. She was, however, able to form an opinion of him through the long, rambling telephone messages her predecessor had mentioned. When she first accessed the church's voice mail, she thought she must be listening to several weeks' worth of messages, but she soon realized they could easily have been the product of one or two days. Only one or two members had ever heard any of the messages, since only the pastor had the access code, but everyone had heard the former pastor's complaints about them. Both the content and the way the messages were phrased and delivered convinced Sandra that while Henry was able to function on some levels, he suffered from a serious mental illness.

Sandra began a program of visitation with all the church members, and she asked most of them how they felt about Henry and what their experiences with him had been. As facts came to light, she pieced together a picture of his history with Redeemer.

Henry had already been a homeless person for some time when he began attending the church about two years previously. He attended faithfully each week. Over time, the church began to pay him \$10 per week to pick up paper and trash. He, in turn, put a small amount in the collection plate each week.

When the church constructed a platform outside a side door to the facility to make that entrance easier to use, Henry immediately moved his belongs onto it and began to live there under a tarpaulin he used as a tent. Since he lived outside without bathing facilities, Henry's body odor had soon become an issue, especially among the fastidious older women near whom he sat. A few members volunteered to take his clothes home and wash them to try to alleviate the problem, and at least one member was continuing to do his laundry once a week when Sandra arrived.

By then, however, his odor was no longer a problem in worship. Henry had stopped attending services some months before as a result as a change in the sanctuary – the denomination's logo had been added to the wall behind the communion table. Henry told the members that they had become "idolaters" because they had placed symbols inside the church. He also identified "idolatrours" symbols elsewhere;

for instance, he told the choir director that the fish symbol on his Bible cover made him an idolater. He said that he would no longer enter the building lest he become an idolater.

Nevertheless, this assertion did not convince those members who thought he could gain access to the building in their absence, and they still thought that it was he who was responsible for the disappearance of various small items (including one of Sandra's Bibles, which she left in the

pulpit for use there.) Sandra and others who came to the church during the week frequently found outside doors unlocked, even though they were sure the doors had been locked securely after services on Sunday.


Along with the \$10 a week the church paid Henry for picking up trash, a number of members brought him food on a regular basis. One, a single woman in her late sixties, said that some months previously, on a night that was unusually cold

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for their Southern city, she became concerned about Henry and brought him an extra blanket. She found that he had candles burning under the tarpaulin, presumably for extra warmth. She told him this was unsafe, but he did not extinguish them, and she was terrified all that night that there would be a fire that would injure or kill Henry, and possibly destroy the church and the buildings that were immediately adjacent to it as well. She had felt helpless to prevent a disaster that night, and she was still concerned that the incident would be repeated.

The member who felt the most responsibility for the safety of the building, along with legal and/or insurance concerns that accompanied a homeless person inhabiting the yard, was Sam, the chair of the Board of Trustees. Fortunately for Sandra, Sam was not just a competent and capable individual who had retired from an executive position involving plant maintenance, but also a kind man with a calming presence who rarely got upset. He told Sandra that he had made numerous attempts to get Henry to seek the various forms of assistance and services that were available for the homeless, but that Henry consistently refused. "When I told him I'd try to help him get Social Security disability, he told me he had a million and a half dollars in the bank and didn't need any money," Sam recalled. "And maybe he does have money and just chooses to live like this—but whether he does or not, I still can't make him let me help him."

Sam's and other members' attempts to find out about Henry's family had always led to dead ends. The telephone messages Henry left included occasional mention of how unfairly he had been treated when his wife "took him to court" for a divorce. His speech patterns indicated some non-Southern origin, and his messages mentioned a past career in the Merchant Marines and travels all over the globe—but he also talked about careers in the Army, the Navy, the Marine Corps, and the CIA, so any accurate clues about his origins remained buried amid thousands of bits of inaccurate and self-contradictory data. "Even if we could find his family," Sam said, "there's no reason to think they'd be able to make him accept help any more than we can."

It was also Sam who first articulated to

Sandra what most, if not all, the members thought about the prospect of increasing, rather than decreasing, their involvement with Henry: "We can't let him live inside, because he would soon have other homeless people in there with him. He's mentally ill, and we can't predict what he might do, much less what people we don't even know might do. Our own people would be afraid to come inside, night or day." And, he said to Sandra, "I've always had a decent relationship with Henry, and if you think he needs to leave, I'll be happy to be the one to tell him."

Because of Sandra's own long commitment to social justice, she had good

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contacts among people involved in social service agencies, and she felt that she was as well positioned as anyone to find services that might be available to assist Henry. She spent considerable time exploring those options; however, her investigations revealed only that there was no agency in that locality that could or would force Henry to stay in a shelter or hospital if he did not wish to do so. Even the police said they would be happy to tell Henry move along," but this would merely result in his living outdoors in a different location, and possibly one not as safe or comfortable for him as the platform outside Redeemer.

As the next few weeks passed, Sandra noticed that while the tone of Henry's telephone messages remained constant, the content began to change. His purchases with the \$10 he earned included batteries for a radio that he kept with him constantly. He preferred religious programming offered by radio evangelists and Henry's messages began to include negative comments, which he said were quotations from radio preachers, about the women's liberation movement. He began to talk frequently about witches and to accuse the congregation of practicing witchcraft because he had once visited a Shinto temple that had trees in its yard, and the church also had trees in its yard—but the primary reason, Sandra was sure,

was that she was an ordained female.

He frequently read passages from the Hebrew Scriptures, and the context made it clear that he believed its injunctions were to be taken quite literally by Christians today. Sandra knew that if he had not encountered the injunction that a witch should not be allowed to live, it was just a matter of time before he did.

At the same time that she was becoming more concerned about Henry, Sandra was also becoming better acquainted with the dynamics of the congregation and aware of other conflicts bubbling not far from the surface. She began to think that it was possible that certain members, including some troubled teens, were at least as likely to be responsible for the fire and petty thefts as Henry was.

She knew that her hard-earned reputation as an advocate for social justice would suffer if word spread that she had dealt unfairly with a homeless individual at her

own church; and on a more basic level, her ability to address social justice issues from the pulpit, as she frequently did, would suffer if she felt that she had sacrificed her own integrity on the issue.

The time for the next council meeting was approaching and Sandra knew that it was inevitable that the question would be raised again; "What should we do about Henry?" This time, she would have to have some sort of answer. □



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This article is excerpted and adapted with permission from *Attentive to God: Thinking Theologically in Ministry* (Abingdon Press, 2008.)