

I visited my daughter Claire, in San Francisco recently. Claire works with InnerCHANGE: A Christian Order Among the Poor, working with homeless people in the Golden Gate Park area. She introduced me to many, many people during my visit. I ate dinner with some. I played music with some. I sat and chatted with some. At times the conversation was serious. Often when we parted, I would ask Claire to tell me more about this or that person. Sometimes I would ask her to guess what was a realistic trajectory for this or that person. Then, when the week was over, I made a list of a few categories and interviewed her about these categories. From these categories I was able to summarize my "portrait of the chronically homeless." First think about "home." What does it take to live "at home." Basically a few things. One must hold a job (or be able to manage government income), obtain food, regularly pay rent, and maintain a residence to the satisfaction of the owner. Or one must be able to live with someone who has these skills. Now, think about these "facts":

1. Education - Perhaps half of Claire's homeless friends have finished high school. The rest dropped out. Claire says that she is surprised how many of them, when they were in school, were in special needs classes of one sort or another.
2. Family History - Claire said that nearly 100% of the people on the streets have been victims of abuse. A good deal of it has been sexual abuse, even for the men. Many of her friends have lived in foster care of some sort. A stable family background is hard to find.
3. Social Skills and Psychological Health - I asked Claire how many of her friends suffered from psychological difficulties: emotional problems, psychoses, or antisocial habits. Claire said that *none* of the people on the streets know how to deal with anger. If they were in a job situation and a boss pushed their button, they would not know how to respond in such a way as to keep the job. Most of her friends suffer from depression at some level, but she reminded me that this must be understood in light of the chronic sleeplessness that plagues the homeless life. Lack of sleep, over time, simply does things with your brain. Over half of her homeless friends suffer some kind of diagnosed mental disorder (bipolar or schizophrenia or other problems)
4. Talents and Employable Skills - I met some pretty talented people. All in all they are a creative bunch (art, music, "fashion design," poetry and more). And some have a few marketable skills, as well. But, as Claire told me, none could supply any positive references from the past 5 or 10 years. Most have never held a job for any real length of time. While I was there, Claire spent a full afternoon with one of her friends, helping him complete a simple resumé. He typed, she helped him figure out what to write and where to find needed information. When the afternoon was over he was one address short of completion. Now he can look forward to walking the streets of San Francisco with the resumé looking for work. I can imagine the discouragement. And this was one of her more "capable" friends.

5. Responsibility - Related to employability is the issue of responsibility. Could they “show up”? Let’s take for example Tuesday Night dinner. The Outer Circle team invites a few homeless friends over for dinner every Tuesday. Actually, they invite them on Monday at pancakes. And then, when they see them again they remind them later Monday or Tuesday morning. Then about 5:00pm on Tuesday they go out looking, making sure their friends have remembered to come or know the way (they live only a few blocks from the park). After all this extensive invitation, by dinner time, some have still forgotten. Basic responsibility is an ability that we take for granted. Others have, for one reason or another, not acquired this ability. And when you are an adult, it is not always an easy ability to acquire.

6. Substance Abuse - Nearly everybody on the streets abuses some kind of substance. In the Golden Gate Park/Haight Ashbury area, it is primarily alcohol, marijuana, and some hallucinogens. Those who do harder drugs tend to end up in a different section of town (called the Tenderloin). Some drink enough at night to put themselves to sleep. Some do drugs to escape. Many are seriously trapped.

Poor education, abusive families, mental illness, social underdevelopment, lack of job skills, little responsibility, substance abuse: when you add up these factors (and other factors could be listed: community support systems, gender orientation, medical conditions, and so on), you find that they do not make for a very pretty picture. In fact the picture looks like a classic bell-curve.

On one side of the bell are those who have fewer of these characteristics or the characteristics are not as serious. They are young enough or “capable enough,” that with some help they might find a way to hold a job, pay rent and live “inside.” Often this lasts only a short while, and they are back on the streets. But sometimes things go well. The day I arrived at the team’s home, they had just returned from a trip up north where they had baptized one of their friends who was spending time away from the city, preparing for a new life. The prospects are good.

On the other side of the bell are those who move from alcohol or “shrooms” to harder drugs. Or something snaps mentally and they lose it. One thing or another happens and they find themselves in the Tenderloin, sleeping in alleys and developing chronic medical problems. Or they die.

Those on either side of the bell are those that Claire knows for a shorter period. They are in the park for a time and then, for better or for worse, they are gone. Many of those whom she influences in a positive way, she never sees again. They go home, get a job, and return to “ordinary life.” Those who take a turn for the worse usually leave the park as well, and she wonders about them. Those in the center of the bell are the “chronic homeless.” They may leave for a while, but they return. The factors in their lives are such that realistically you can’t expect much more.

Now this brings me to the question of ministry. What does ministry look like in such a

situation? Claire is not going to “plant churches,” or “multiply disciples.” She does not even “feed the hungry.” While their team does invite homeless friends for dinners. Their research indicates that food and clothing are plentiful in San Francisco. What is missing is real friendship. Their ministry is friendship, without expectation of return (many are incapable of returning friendship). InnerCHANGE calls it “ministry to the profoundly broken.” Think about Mother Theresa of Calcutta, what could she reasonably expect when she encountered people dying in the streets? Dynamic conversions? Recruiting doctors and hospitals to care for them all? No, but she could pick them up and take them to a “home for the dying” where they could die with dignity. And so she did this much, one person at a time. People provide this kind of unconditional loving ministry all the time: in nursing homes, to needy children, to those with disabilities of various sorts. Although there are always those miraculous moments, usually these are ministries that will seldom make a big splash. We all have some measure of this kind of ministry every day. Think about it. Who are you caring for? Who do you know in your life who could use some care (remember our discussion of care last NewsLetter?), and who may not be able to receive your care well, or for whom you expect few “results”?

What I noticed about Claire’s ministry was that she provided three factors not mentioned above, factors which, whether they produced “results” or not, communicated the heart of Christ. So add to the list above the following:

7. Faith - Claire said to me that it was really important for her to share her faith. Prayer and Bible Study are built into the life of the ministry team and into their work with the homeless. Why? Because a faith, a relationship with God provides a center of acceptance, of values, of life that can begin to infect the other areas of life. I watched this first hand in my conversations with our homeless friends.

8. Hope - Once, while I was playing in the drum circle, Claire wandered around the “hill” making contacts with the people sitting around. Later she told me she had a real good conversation with one person. This person was complaining about another friend’s drinking. So Claire confronted him about his own drinking. They laughed a bit, but Claire spoke honestly with him. She said, “I just want you to be sober enough to go back home when it is your time to visit with your family.” At this point the man broke down and cried. But this was not a cry of despair, but rather an acknowledgement of truth. He *did* want to see his family. Claire had touched a deep hope in his life. She fed him hope where he needed it. I saw this again and again. Homeless have few who believe in them. This is something the InnerCHANGE team provides the homeless: someone who believes in them--a valuable commodity indeed.

9. Love - I was in a kitchen of a ministry that provides dinner to a wide range of needy folks on Friday night. We were cleaning up after serving about thirty people. Others were in another room watching a movie. I was chatting with the director of this ministry and asking him about his work. The director turned to one of the people who had come for dinner and asked him, “So, why do *you* come here. Why do you hang out on Friday nights?” That homeless person turned to Claire, pointed at her, and said immediately, “because of her, and the InnerCHANGE

people. They have shown me true love.” I saw Claire and her team visit people in the hospital who never expected to have a visit. I saw them help someone retrieve their dog from the pound. I saw them lend their phone so people could call home. They took sincere interest in the concerns of the people on the streets.

Faith, hope, and love. And the greatest of these is love.

So, the question then is, how do you do it? And how do you do it and stay at it? And this brings me to the topic of community. We live in a world today that is suffering from a great deal of hurt. And as Christians we are called to offer faith, hope, and love to that hurt. Perhaps we all have known one who is “profoundly broken,” who requires a great deal of care and promises to offer nothing but heartache in return. How do we offer our faith, hope, and love? We do so as *community*. In an earlier NewesLetter, I talked about community as sharing. We share ideas, we share activities, we share interests. But we can also share our *care*. Together we can absorb the needs of the profoundly broken which alone are too much to handle. I watched the Outer Circle team support each other when discouraged, take up slack where another did not have time (or emotional energy), pray for their friends by name, offer possessions for use when needed and more. Together they were able to give much more than what they could have as individuals.

Are you longing for community? How about finding the greatest needs around you and joining hands (and hearts) with a few friends to meet them together?

May God the Father bless you with His riches in Christ Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Evan B. Howard