



byFaith

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Ministry That Gets Messy

Carolyn Curtis, Issue Number 26, January 2010

Like 45

It's Wednesday, a busy day in the life of Jeremy Tuinstra, pastor of Covenant Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Burtonsville, Md.—a church that's drawn admiration, curiosity, ridicule, scorn, and, truth be told, abandonment by some who couldn't stomach the smell of their fellow worshipers.

Tuinstra is at the wheel of a 15-passenger van, built on an ambulance frame, which is fitting for a vehicle that's delivering the sick and the poor and even those who are regaining health, if not quite wealth.

The light blue van stops and familiar faces take their seats, greeting "Pastor Jeremy" (sometimes "Father") along with other homeless people, representing a community that comprises a quarter of Covenant's worshipers.

On Sunday mornings, as on this Wednesday afternoon, some show up high on drugs or alcohol, needing a shower and a meal, but attracted to the hope of redemption they experience in the company of this pastor and a remnant who did not flee when he began this new focus, an intense ministry to the poor.

It's a commitment that's a notch above what many churches, even in the PCA, would recognize as mercy ministry. It's a life of obedience and service to Jesus for a population who often disappoints and can barely give back. It's ministry that's direct, personal, hands on. And it's messy, with soft boundaries and gray areas, because it engages people who have already failed, over and over, at social services provided by government agencies and other organizations with tried-and-true methods.

Restoring Dignity Through Relationship

Tuinstra, 35, a product of Midwestern values and a Dutch Reformed background, spends time working together with other churches, PCA or not, to serve a Day Center where homeless people come for showers, a meal, laundry facilities, and canned goods. He attributes his leadership position among fellow ministers to what he calls his big mouth, but he also leads by example. On Wednesdays, he spends his day driving to and from the Center, an activity that often spills far beyond simple transporting and into the life of his family and church.

"I wish [Covenant] would embrace this ministry more, but that's okay for now," he says. He's seen non-homeless members come and go, and, though he recognizes their reluctance to get their hands dirty, it frustrates him. "I don't understand their excuses. Too many people come to a church with expectations that it will serve 'me and mine,' provide a good program for their children, and so forth."

"Instead of running from this population with fear that they will be violent or spoil our perfect houses or ruin our families, we can rigorously engage with them, trusting God to make us strong."

But instead of worrying about growing a youth group, he seeks to provide real-life experiences, like Sunday afternoons when he and wife Julie host homeless people in their home, playing Nintendo Wii and hanging out with their six children, even though some of the guests are sex offenders and people with other criminal records.

"The heart of this struggle is relationship," he says. "We can restore dignity through redemptive relationships that expect good attitudes and behavior. Instead of running from this population with fear that they will be violent or spoil our perfect houses or ruin our families, we can rigorously engage with them, trusting God to make us strong."

By pushing them in the direction of Jesus, Tuinstra finds that many homeless people experience the strength to continue in that direction, which gives them a glimpse of answers to their life questions: Can I stop drinking? Can I work? Can I see my kids again?

"My Friends"

Tuinstra refers to his homeless congregants never as "that homeless man or homeless woman" but as "my friends." Today, 15 or so of his friends ride in the van.

Eric Weathers, 41, is happy to report he's been hired to do maintenance at a nearby hotel, which is a 15-minute walk from the tent city where he lives in a wooded area. Fresh from a meal of chicken, pasta, green beans, and chocolate cake at the Day Center, he describes how "Pastor Jeremy" literally has stood by him in his struggles with alcohol and the law.

Weathers describes one situation as "being in the wrong place at the wrong time," an altercation which resulted in a broken jaw and his mouth wired shut. "Pastor Jeremy went with me to court. He didn't have to, but he did. And he didn't ask for anything in return."

On another occasion in court, Tuinstra recalls hearing the judge direct Weathers "to obey the counsel of his pastor," advice Jeremy calls "good, creative work in the court system."

Weldon Lincoln, 48, rides today, describing his living situation in a pop-up camper parked on Covenant Church's property. It's comfortable but a far cry from his life before being laid off from 10 years as a fiber optics cable operator for Verizon, when he had "a home, two cars, took vacations,

and lived pretty much like the rest of society.” But he was living above his means, he admits, and although he had no drug or alcohol dependency problems like many in the homeless population, he ran through his savings and 401(k).

Now Lincoln’s priorities are different. He holds a driver and supervisor position at Manheim’s Baltimore-Washington Auto Exchange. “Building a relationship with God is my main goal, even more important than saving my paycheck. That’s a definite change for me. Some homeless people will accept [Covenant’s] help, but they won’t change.”

He also believes in what he describes as the 50/50 contract he has with Covenant, “bringing something to the table, not just taking.” Part of today’s ride includes a discussion of cleaning and landscaping work that needs to be done around the church to prepare for Sunday services. Most of today’s vanload will return Saturday to do that maintenance, which will serve as a time of fellowship as well as service.

Tuinstra says, “The first to volunteer to help me clean toilets is often a homeless friend who finds a parked car to sleep in at night.”

Treating the Homeless as Guests

Volunteers Kristen Christy, Julie Tuinstra, and many others operate from home kitchens and two ovens at the church, and prepare breakfasts and lunches, guessing how many will show up.

“Sometimes we dash out to grab another bag of bagels or whatever to supplement our menu,” says Kristen, “but we often find that, when we get to the last serving, it’s exactly the right amount.” The loaves-and-fish lesson reminds Kristen that “these are our guests. I try to hold myself to the same high standards of menus and recipes that I would if these people were weekend guests in my home.”

“Through them we see their brokenness but we also see ourselves, needing God to forgive and strengthen us, understanding that Jesus came to redeem us through His engagement with the world.”

Even birthdays are marked with the homeless guests’ favorite cake recipes, and the homeless people sense the care put into each week’s preparation. Adds Tuinstra, “It’s not bulk food intended to satiate the masses like they might find at a soup kitchen, but recipes created for nutrition, variety, and expressly to show love.”

The Tuinstras can relate to the stories of many of their homeless guests because for nine months some years ago “we were jobless and technically homeless, surviving with help from friends and family,” says Jeremy. “We learned that relationships are what matter, even more than a roof over our heads.”

He adds, “This work is about relationship—for homeless people and those ministering to them. Through them we see their brokenness but we also see ourselves, needing God to forgive and strengthen us, not just to survive, but understanding that Jesus came to redeem us through His engagement with the world.”

Today’s van ride includes delivering severely intoxicated Jimmy, 53, to the emergency room. An occasional church attender, he was beaten on the streets. The pastor counsels his friend to be honest about his level of alcohol consumption because “it will affect the meds.” He also cautions the

ER attendants that Jimmy is a friendly drunk when he's wasted, but he's not sure how he'll act when he's detoxing.

Tuinstra recalls other trips to the ER. "The staff is getting to know my face. If I find one of my friends experiencing chest pains or having difficulty breathing, sometimes I have to be pretty stubborn and insist they go to the hospital." He recounts a time when he delivered a man back to his mattress on the floor at a flop house and noticed that his bedside reading included three resources: a book on growing marijuana, Covenant's favorite evangelism tract, *Two Ways to Live*, and the paperback Bible supplied by the church.

Jeremy Tuinstra could pastor a congregation he describes as "a doctrinal think tank, extremely literate in theology," but he prefers to inspire Christians to put their biblical and doctrinal knowledge to work and be the gospel to the needy.

Here, Jeremy Tuinstra shares with byFaith his insights on working with the homeless .

Q: What is your congregation learning from your ministry to the homeless community, especially about the power and purpose of the gospel?

A: Following Jesus in a fallen world is hard but good. Promoting Jesus and His kingdom in our community requires Jesus' followers to engage in unthinkably hard ministries that promise unbelievably good rewards. Jesus does not call His followers to a life of "faith inaction" but faith in action. Through ministry to the homeless community, we have been summoned to believe (again and again) that God saves people who don't deserve it without their help. Through ministry to the homeless community, we have been challenged to live lives of redemptive love to people the world considers human garbage.

Q: Describe the range of reactions from other area churches and how these have encouraged and discouraged you.

A: When I described how Jesus calls me to die to myself and become "the scum of the earth" (1 Corinthians 4:8-13) in order to serve Him according to His redemptive plans for the poor, one young woman gasped, "Wow! Your church must be really small."

Because this ministry is so different from what many churchgoers expect, some view it as a niche that may be good for some, especially those who are really gifted for compassion ministry, but not necessarily expected of all. It's discouraging to see people accommodate Jesus and His mission to their expectations. "Doing church" is too often made to fit our expectations of nice religious experiences for us and our families.

I have been greatly encouraged by the help of two of our partners: a Korean congregation that worships in our building, and others from a nearby Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA) congregation. The Korean congregation provided the 15-passenger van to support our transportation needs. And the RPCNA congregation sends volunteers to prepare and serve meals on Sundays; plus they make time to sit and talk with the homeless people who come to Covenant.

Q: How should people of faith relate to the homeless? What does the Bible direct us to do?

A: Homeless people are people. They are broken like we are broken. Their stories are like our stories. Respectfully invite homeless people to come out from the hopelessness and the misery of

anti-social, self-destructive lifestyle choices to begin a redemptive relationship with you. I tell every homeless person who hears about my work and our church, "I cannot give you many things (job, car, house, big bag of money, etc.). But I can give you myself." I think this is what Jesus envisions when He describes "sheep" who feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, invite the stranger in, clothe the naked, look after the sick, and visit those in prison (Matthew 25:31-46). We move closer in redemptive and relational ways toward those who are broken in order to move them closer to Jesus.

Q: What are common misconceptions? What do you wish pastors and laypeople knew who are considering this type of ministry?

A: Homeless people are perceived to be lazy, ignorant, dangerous, conniving, substance addicted, mentally ill, and justly receiving what they deserve. While some homeless people are all or some of these things, many are not. Often their stories begin with a serious relationship breakdown with parents or a spouse, legal charges, a job layoff, outstanding medical bills, mishandled grief, mortgage default, orphaning, etc. To engage this type of ministry, it is critical to listen to the people you hope to serve. Get beyond the stereotypes, biases, prejudice, and know-it-all-ism. Be prepared to invest your life in meaningful ways in someone who is struggling. Do your best to build a friendship in which you are able to learn something from the homeless person you love.

One more thing: homeless people know where to find food. They will more than likely not die of hunger on the streets or in their tent villages. Worry more about the table conversation you have with them or the relational goals you could accomplish than what material things you are able to give.

Q: Describe how you approach homeless people. Are there cases of rejection or other objections? If so, how do you deal with them?

A: In my experience, only one man has outright rejected my invitation to participate in some way in our ministry. He considers himself a Muslim and wants nothing to do with Jesus or with me. I believe this man knows two kingdoms are flatly opposed and in conflict, so coming closer to our ministry would directly challenge his Muslim faith.

The effects of redemption on the very different lives we are reaching with the gospel will take different shapes. Some will reunite with family, return to school, work and earn good wages, and marry. Others will come to know Jesus and still live in a tent in the woods.

Approaching homeless people is like approaching others in our community whom we may not know. Since I respectfully invite people to come to the church building to eat breakfast, to worship Jesus, to eat lunch, and to spend a little time together, no one refuses or objects. Many do not do anything with my invitation. But by inviting people to take a step toward redemptive relationships and ultimately to redemption in Jesus, I want them to feel free to opt in when they are ready. By God's grace, many will. A sincere invitation that respects the innate dignity of the homeless person is effective because no one else in our community treats the poor with respect and sincerity.

Q: What do you see as the future for this ministry? As a result of it, how do you see the congregation changing? The community? The relationships in the church? And how do you see the lives of your homeless congregation changing?

A: To quote my wife Julie, "This is not a ministry for instant gratification." Moving toward happily ever after takes long-term, low-key, redemptive relationships. So the results of this work will be

discovered after years of encouraging words, praying together, eating some meals, hanging out, playing the Wii, going to court, visiting in the hospital, grieving, and rejoicing.

The effects of redemption on the very different lives we are reaching with the gospel will take different shapes. Some will reunite with family, return to school, work and earn good wages, and marry. Others will come to know Jesus and still live in a tent in the woods.

I hope to see the congregation become more willing to suffer insult with Jesus, who was known to hang out with the sick, the poor, the drunks, and the prostitutes. By coming closer to the brokenness of the poor, we will see our own brokenness more clearly. By confronting hurts we cannot heal, we will be led to lean hard on Jesus.

I hope to see the community roused out of the false sense of security and superiority that seems to come along with Washington D.C. region salaries and access to power. If we can demonstrate to our watching world that money and power do not effect radical personal transformation, our community may begin to look for something more powerful. As it is, my two-income, government-employed, highly educated, import-car driving neighbors are satisfied with too little—the things that easily can be lost.

I hope this ministry communicates that a relationship with a deeply flawed human ambassador of the redemptive kingdom of Jesus is good. But a relationship with the perfect redeemer, Jesus, is transformational.

Carolyn Curtis is an author, editor, and speaker living in Fort Worth, Texas.

Comments

All Fields Are Required:

First Name:Keith

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Location:Middletown NJ (church)

Comment:

"...the people who know their God shall be strong, and carry out great exploits." (Daniel 11:32b)

Carolyn Curtis "hits a home run" with a wonderful article about a true disciple of King Jesus. Thank you, Lord, for these Your servants and their labors.

2010-01-10 07:33 [Permalink](#) [Reply](#)

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First Name: Carolyn

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Thanks for your kind remarks. Pastor Jeremy Tuinstra and his congregation make a compelling story!

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