

“What We Do — Nuisance or a Necessity?”

10 September 2023

Scripture: Matthew 25:35-40

Matthew 25:35. . . for I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a foreigner and you showed me hospitality, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you came to see me.' Then the virtuous will say, "Our Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and fed you, or thirsty and gave you a drink? And when was it that we saw you as a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we found you ill or in prison?' And then the Lord of Heaven and Earth will respond, 'I swear, whatever you did for those most ignored, who are also members of my family, you did it for me as well.

Sermon

At Fort Collins Mennonite Fellowship, we take our cue from the scripture you read above. And so, we are inclined to think that Jesus, in one form or another, does spend a lot of time sitting on the benches in the yard of our church. Sadly, and far too often then, in our own ignorance, we too have asked him to move along and stop being a nuisance!

But we hold fast to the belief that building relationships are the still the key to helping people in crisis. We try to build these relationships with our homeless neighbors every day by doing some fairly unremarkable things.

The folks living inside the building always introduce themselves and get to know who's hanging around. We ask people where they plan to stay for the night, how long they've been in town and what resources they're aware of.

Providing Showers, Bathrooms, and Laundry Facilities

We provide showers and bathroom facilities, since the lottery for showers at the Murphy Center sometimes folks must wait for 6 weeks! Can you imagine waiting more than a week or a month for a shower? At FCMF we make sure people can get a shower when they need it. Imagine how good a cool shower feels on a hot summer day or how good a hot shower feels on those freezing winter days!

And as for bathrooms, the situation is even more dismal. If you are homeless, there is only ONE set of year round public bathrooms for the entire city of Ft Collins. Currently it is open only from 10 am to 8 pm. Which begs the question, "So, what happens if someone needs to urinate or defecate between 8 pm and 10 am?" If someone has diarrhea or a woman starts her period unexpectedly, there is nowhere for them to get clean except our at our church.

Helping Those with Mental Health and Addiction Issues

We also build relationships with those in crisis. Often times it is very clear that a person is struggling with mental health issues and/or drug and alcohol issues. Our staff and volunteers are adept at dealing with these situations. We often interrupt potential drug buys and drug use, but we also provide folks with information and options. For instance, we get them some CO-SLAW. No, cabbage is not an opioid substitute, but we connect them with the Colorado Opioid Synergy for Larimer and Weld Counties.

For those struggling with addiction we help them enter into a residential treatment program. Seemingly small things like, making sure their Medicaid coverage is in place and meets Narconon requirements.

We provide assistance to schedule and complete the intake phone interviews or provide transportation to the in-person interviews. Since beds are not always readily available when someone decides to enter treatment, we give folks a place to stay until a bed is open. This time in our church helps people enter into treatment with a few days of sober living, clean clothes, stocked hygiene items and encouragement from folks who have also recently graduated from these programs.

We facilitate interviews and transportation for men interested in Harvest Farms' residential drug and alcohol treatment program. We have also helped folks find treatment locations in Denver. Once treatment is finished, we help folks find sober-living households. by getting them into direct contact with those who do the interviews.

When we encounter someone who is in a mental health crisis and is feeling or behaving unsafely, we often use the services of The Crisis Stabilization Unit (the other "CSU" in town). Sometimes we call for the mobile case worker who can come to us; other times, we transport individuals to the actual CSU. If the person wants someone to sit with them through the intake to support them, we often do that as well.

We also connect folks with a program called Lifestance. Once they have a working phone, they can access regular counseling and psychiatric appointments for medications through Lifestance. Folks often use our Wi-fi and/or computer to make appointments and meet their other mental health needs. We help set appointment reminders and even "holler at folks" hanging in the yard, or text, or call them to remind them.

We send folks to the Northern Colorado AIDS Project (NCAP). This organization not only provides us with sharps containers, clean syringes, and disposal of dirty needles, they also provide food, clothing, medical supplies, counseling, and drug cessation programs. NCAP also helps individuals who have tested positive for the HIV virus to receive medications, counseling and treatment.

Providing Legal Assistance

Due to the criminalization of poverty, we often help folks with legal issues. We allow people to stay overnight, inside the building, prior to an early morning court date or a job interview. Hopefully, when they are well-rested, fed, showered, and clothed, they will be at their best.

In close concert with John Carlson at the Thunder Justice Project, we help folks navigate the very disorientating court system. By offering to advocate for them and accompany them to many legal appointments, we develop trusting and supportive relationships with at-risk folks. Our support often includes contacting the judge, attorneys, police, jail staff, and various social service entities.

We regularly provide transportation to and from pre-trial, probation, parole, and court appointments. We sometimes pay for and provide transportation to court mandated urine analysis for drug use screening.

As we work closely with various parties, we also hope to encourage those organizations to become more aware of the unique issues the homeless face in our legal system. Our goal is to avoid failure to appear, failure to comply, and failure of any bond conditions. We measure success by positive participation in the court process and successful completion of sentencing, resolving the case legally, and a return of the cash bond to our revolving bond fund.

We encourage folks to use the Diversion program at the Municipal Court matters and our church provides folks with plenty of opportunities to complete community service requirements. We encourage folks to participate in Drug and Wellness Court as well.

Partnering with Others

We serve as a location for people to meet with and sometimes actually locate their clients. To put this in context, imagine what it is like for an individual experiencing a full-blown paranoid psychotic outbreak, to try to get in touch with someone at Summit Stone for help. Outcomes are much better when our residential staff keeps that individual from freezing to death by bringing them inside for food, clothes, a hot shower, and then vouches for them to Court staff.

Outreach Fort Collins workers regularly hang out on the property and we work closely with them. Often, we actually walk folks over to the library where Outreach Fort Collins has regular hours to meet with the homeless. Outreach Fort Collins also contacts us when they have a client who needs emergency shelter for a night or two, and the traditional shelters in town are not a suitable option for that individual.

We frequently call or meet with the Denver Rescue Mission of Fort Collins to verify locations, open beds, and program requirements. During inclement weather, we transport people directly to winter shelter, and when the Overflow shelter is full, we welcome folks inside our church.

A number of women in the midst of violent domestic relationships have sought sanctuary at FCMF. Due to our relationships with them, we were able to take them to Crossroads safe house.

Clothing the Naked

But we still haven't even gotten to the specific list that Jesus provided in the earlier scripture. Yes, there have been numerous times where we literally have to clothe the naked. I know that I have seen far too many buttocks in my time due to the torn or completely worn through clothes that result when someone lives on the street, whose clothing does not fit, or who lacks a belt.

We have a yard laundry system to constantly recycle soiled, used, wet clothing, bedding, and backpacks. Often, when someone has been recently released from jail or hospital, they return to the streets with nothing but the clothes on their back. We keep boots, working bicycles, clean blankets, and some clothes for emergencies when people are in immediate need.

We partner with Clothe the People who, when we tell them about an individual's needs, wants, and sizes, can always find just the right clothes for them.

Feeding the Hungry

In addition to our own food pantry that we keep stocked through regular trips to the Larimer County Food Bank, "Food Not Bombs" serves food twice each week on our outdoor patio. Our partnerships with both "Food not Bombs" and "Clothe the People" have allowed us to extend Jesus' instructions to simple things like the purchase, storage, and distribution of insect repellent a staple for those sleeping outside during West Nile outbreaks.

Saving Lives

Another rather important thing we hand out liberally was not included on Jesus' list — NARCAN. Maybe you've seen the NARCAN dispensers that are liberally scattered throughout both the inside and outside of our building. Simply put, NARCAN save lives because in the event of an opioid overdose, NARCAN will literally and instantaneously wake someone up. I have never had to use it but the intrepid folks living in our building have successfully administered NARCAN not only on our property several times, but in Library Park, on a neighbor's lawn, and in the public bathrooms a block away — and in doing so, they have saved lives.

Building Ongoing Relationships

But true relationships should go both ways. We often share openly with our friends about FCMF's struggles to satisfy the demands of the City or our housed neighbors, and even some of the homeless who choose to not respect our requests or who vandalize the property. The result of this sharing is that many of our homeless friends actually help enforce our expectations, help with picking up the trash, intervene to reduce conflicts or loud and obnoxious behaviors, stop drug use, and interrupt drug deals.

The overwhelming majority of individuals in the homeless community do value what we are trying to do here and they do take various levels of ownership in order to keep our little corner of the neighborhood, a place where anyone who needs to, can safely gather and simply "be."

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