

A Message on Homelessness: A Renewal of Commitment

In our country today homelessness persists. Hundreds of thousands of people continue to live without housing within a society of abundance. [1] The number of elderly people, women, and children among the homeless is increasing. Families are the fastest growing segment of the homeless population. Homelessness is a reality in urban, suburban, and rural communities. Millions of people exist on the precarious edge of homelessness. Without major changes in our society, homelessness will be more pervasive in the 1990s than it was in the 1980s.

For some time congregations, individuals, social agencies, and synods of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America have called attention to the plight of homeless people. Many members have worked with other churches and groups to provide food, shelter, and care, to study the social causes of homelessness, and to advocate policies that respond to the housing crisis. People in our congregations who are homeless and potentially homeless remind us of the urgency of the situation.

It is time to acknowledge with gratitude what people are doing, to confess that we have too often neglected homelessness, and to renew our commitment to act with justice and compassion. The Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America gives thanks to God for what is being done and urges members of our church to take on renewed responsibility for the troubling, deeply-rooted reality of homelessness.

Remembering the Reality

Homelessness concerns people, human beings created in God's image for a life of dignity in justice. The story of each homeless person is unique. The name, the circumstances, the decisions, the faith, the joys, and sorrows of each belong to precious individuals.

Becoming homeless is often triggered by a crisis in a person's life. The crisis might be related to the changing availability of affordable housing and rental patterns, or to job loss. It might be connected with poor health, mental illness, addiction, domestic violence, the break-up of a relationship, or natural disaster. In facing the crisis, persons do not receive the needed familial or communal support, or governmental or private assistance to keep them from losing their housing. Once without a permanent dwelling, individuals often experience a downward spiral in their lives.

Being homeless is being without -- without shelter, without resources, without support, without recognition, without power to influence society. Being "houseless" is lacking a permanent place to stay dry and warm, a place to feel secure, a private space. Simple survival becomes a full-time, humiliating task. People who are homeless often lose their sense of self-worth and their hope for the future. They feel cut-off and alienated from the rest of society.

Homelessness also concerns society, that is, the institutions, attitudes, and decisions that form the web of relationships in which we live. Homelessness emerges from the brokenness of society, from realities such as the breakdown of family, impoverished schools, low wages, the lack of employment opportunities, the diminishing supply of affordable housing for the poor, the absence of health insurance, and the inadequacy of services for the mentally ill and the substance abuser. Greed, selfishness, and racism are also factors in the economics and politics of housing, contributing to the persistence and increase of homelessness.

Housing is a fundamental human right. [2] The United States government has stated its commitment to the goal that all citizens have decent housing and a suitable living environment (Federal Housing Act of 1949). Yet the policies and practices of governmental and economic institutions are not adequately responding to the crisis; indeed, some policies and practices actually contribute to homelessness. During the last decade the federal government has virtually withdrawn from low-income housing development and support. This has resulted in reduced options for low-income households. The absence of a genuine commitment at the federal level to provide the resources to address a critical shortage of affordable housing has exacerbated the problem of homelessness.

Certain attitudes among people who have housing both express and further contribute to society's brokenness. Negative feelings toward homeless persons run from indifference to fear to open hostility. Drawing on stereotypes, many view homeless people as lazy, shiftless, parasitic, and opportunistic. With a misguided sense of superiority, lines are drawn between "them" and "us." In some cases, those who suffer from political or economic policies are blamed for a situation they could not control. In many ways, people without housing are made to feel like unwanted outsiders, persons without rights and undeserving of respect.

Called to Care

God heard the cry of a homeless people and delivered them out of oppression in Egypt. Jesus, "who [had] nowhere to lay his head" (Luke 9:58), ministered with compassion to the poor and vulnerable. In practicing hospitality, we are promised to encounter the living Lord: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Mat 25:35).

God's mandate concerning people who exist on the margins of society is clear: "Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked" (Pss 82:3-4). Working for justice with and for homeless people is doing God's will.

We, too, participate in and are responsible for society's brokenness. Yet, confident of God's forgiveness, we are daily renewed, so we might turn from what dehumanizes people to accept anew responsibility for justice. Through the Gospel and the Holy Spirit, people with and without housing alike are incorporated into the church, God's new community founded on grace and faith, not on society's view of success or failure.

The Gospel does not provide ready-made solutions to homelessness. God's love in Jesus Christ does, however, move us to care for homeless people as God cares for all. Christians who have shelter are called to care, called to walk with homeless people in their struggle for a more fulfilling life and for adequate, affordable, and sustainable housing.

Walking with People Who Are Homeless

The reasons for homelessness are complex. The homeless population is diverse so that no one solution is going to be valid for the whole population. The realities vary from place to place. In addressing homelessness, therefore, members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America need to consider the many dimensions of this crisis.

The church's ministry of Word and Sacrament is intended also for people who are homeless. Regrettably, this ministry is rare among those homeless, yet it is present. In these communities of faith, children are baptized, the Bible studied, mutual support given, forgiveness proclaimed, the Eucharist celebrated, and the dead entrusted to God. Where God's love for people who are

homeless is heard and lived, hope is engendered that breaks the downward spiral of life. We walk with people who are homeless when they are empowered to defend their own rights. Is this a ministry which your congregation can and should offer?

As long as there are people without housing, Christians who have dwellings are called upon to assist homeless persons to provide for their basic needs. Numerous congregations and social ministry organizations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America do this, offering food, shelter, respect, care, and counseling to the homeless. Many volunteers give of themselves in food pantries, shelters, group homes, and other forms of service with the homeless. People are working to provide transitional and permanent housing, including programs that encourage and support home ownership. What does your congregation do? What might it do?

In many cases, a shelter ministry of a congregation is a beginning in which to explore the realities of homelessness. Temporary shelter for people who are homeless is an emergency measure. Adequate housing is needed for humane living. Educational programs can help us to understand better our personal and public responsibility for homelessness. By engaging in conversation with homeless persons, congregations can learn directly from them. Congregations can study what our church's state and federal advocacy is doing in relation to homelessness and support these efforts. How does education within your congregation address homelessness? [3]

Christians walk with the homeless when they join with others to voice deep concern about homelessness, ask hard questions, and advocate policies that seek to provide job training, employment opportunities, housing, education, health care, and support for the homeless. While as Christians we may differ in our views on what policies will be most effective, we ought not overlook the need for new and sustained initiatives by government, businesses, and non-profit organizations, including church groups. Church leaders are challenged to help create the public will to eliminate homelessness. What do you and your congregation do to advocate for those without shelter?

Equally important are the will and wisdom to keep even more children, women, and men from becoming homeless. Walking with people who are homeless includes the responsibility to prevent homelessness. We are called to be aware of and concerned for people in our midst who are vulnerable to losing their housing. Neighborhood and community initiatives are needed. Effective political and economic policies to assure housing, employment, literacy, and health services for low-income families can help people who are potentially homeless.

Let the church pray for a renewal of commitment to walk more closely with and among people who are homeless and who are at risk of becoming homeless in their daily struggles, sufferings, and hopes.

Notes

1. According to "Hunger Action Forum," "a consensus is finally emerging about the number of homeless people in this country." Various studies "suggest that on any given night the homeless population numbers between 250,000 and 600,000. This range corresponds to the figures now used by [the Department of Housing and Urban Development]." It is estimated "that the total number of people who are homeless in any one year is twice that." (Vol.3, No.8, September, 1990, p.2.) Other estimates go much higher, especially when the count includes families and persons forced to double-up because of the lack of affordable housing. Such victims are often referred to as the "invisible homeless."

2. Article 25 of "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights" (1948) states: "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself [or herself] and his [or her] family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care necessary social services...." The "Implementing Resolutions for Human Rights Social Statement" of the Lutheran Church in America (1979) states: "This church commits itself to the public policy goals of ...decent housing...as fundamental rights of every citizen of ...the United States." The social statement of the American Lutheran Church, "Toward Fairness in Public Taxing and Spending," (1982) states: "All persons in society are entitled to that which is necessary to lead a healthful existence...The government is responsible for providing a basic floor of benefits at an adequate level for health and decency; it is to ensure that no one is forced to go hungry or homeless and none are deprived of adequate medical care."

3. For educational material on homelessness contact the Division for Congregational Ministries of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

This message was approved by the board of the Commission for Church in Society. It was adopted by the ELCA Church Council on October 22, 1990.

Copyright (C) 1990 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.
Produced by the Department for Studies, Division for Church in Society.
Permission is granted to reproduce this document as needed,
providing each copy displays the copyright as printed above.