

Advocates for homeless see little hope apart from spiritual renewal_11204

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Volunteers work at Manna, a ministry to the homeless sponsored by First Baptist Church of San Antonio, offering hot meals and a Christian message of hope.

Advocates for homeless see little hope apart from spiritual renewal

By John Hall

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Spiritual renewal is the key to homeless people overcoming their personal issues and getting off the street, according to leaders of Christian ministries.

Ministries that provide food, clothing and job training effectively meet immediate needs, but they need to be combined with a spiritual effort to transform lives and move people toward attaining their own housing, said Charles Little, a deacon at Cornerstone Baptist Church in Dallas.

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Christian revival leads to a change of lifestyle and morality, said Little, who teaches a Bible study twice a week prior to serving lunch to homeless people in his community. God can help people overcome vices that keep them homeless, he insisted.

"We truly believe once they give their lives to Christ, God will begin to work in their heart," Little said. "He will provide the means."

Rick Brenny, a Baptist leader in homeless ministry and executive director of Jefferson Street Baptist Center in Louisville, Ky., has seen spiritual efforts produce results in his outreach.

Less than 30 percent of people served at homeless ministries typically find permanent housing, but 38 percent of his clients are off the streets, Brenny said. And an additional 40 percent are making progress toward that goal.

There is a lot of work to do, ministry leaders said.

Laws nationwide are pushing the homeless off street corners and preventing them from sleeping in public but not providing enough shelters to care for them, said Jimmy Dorrell, director of Mission Waco.

And Americans are not inclined to try to help the homeless, because they never see the situation improve, Dorrell added.

Personal issues also hurt the homeless. According to statistics from the National Resource Center on Homelessness and Mental Illness, two-thirds of the homeless population reported either substance use, mental health problems or both. As much as half have both concerns.

Broken down further, 38 percent of the homeless population indicated alcohol issues, 26 percent said they have drug problems and 39 percent told of some form of mental health problems.

These challenges often prevent the homeless from holding steady jobs,

Dorrell said. They either get high or drunk and miss work, or they do not take their medication and are unable to function.

Despite their problems, only one in 100 enter a rehabilitation program, said R.B. Cooper, minister of church and community outreach at First Baptist Church in San Antonio.

If they get in a program, only one in 30 get clean, Dorrell noted.

Facilities to treat the mentally ill homeless are few, Cooper said. Non-governmental outreaches typically do not have the funds or trained personnel to provide needed medication and treatment, Cooper explained. State institutions limit how long an individual can stay.

With the deck so stacked against the homeless, God is their hope to straighten out their lives and end their addictions, Little said.

Baptists largely use relationships to share the gospel with the homeless.

Dorrell started Church Under the Bridge to minister to the needy in Waco.

Volunteers dress casually and mingle with the homeless during the services, held beneath Interstate 35.

The friendships that develop help the homeless understand they still are important to others.

"In most cases, they have conviction of sin," Dorrell reported.

"What they don't have is self-valuation. They don't see they are worth saving."

Cornerstone Baptist Church and First Baptist Church in San Antonio link Bible studies with meals. A Bible lesson is given before a meal at both sites.

A consistent Christian presence speaks volumes to the homeless, said

Gerald Davis, a consultant in the Baptist General Convention of Texas Missions Equipping Center.

Homeless ministries show needy individuals that churches care about them and want to help, Davis added.

The efforts let the homeless know the message of hope and redemption is for them as well.

"The most effective thing is being there for them," Davis said. "Let them know you are serious and sincere about wanting a relationship with them. Let them know you are serious and sincere about helping them."