

Voices: Ben finds a home

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“We have a bum sleeping on our porch,” announced a thrift store volunteer one morning as the manager walked through the door.

Momentarily taken aback, the thrift store manager said, “His name is Ben, and God sent him as a guardian angel to watch over our store at night.”

Ben (not his real name) had been sleeping under the awning by the front door, next to a shopping cart filled with everything he owned. He had come to the Baptist Temple Food Pantry seeking food.

Ben sat down with a pantry minister who asked questions designed to help get to the roots of why he needed aid and help him to develop a plan toward greater independence. It turns out Ben, a disabled veteran, was living on the streets and probably had benefits available.

In the past, Baptist Temple would distribute food once per month. People would line up in the afternoon heat, hours in advance of the distribution, many attracted by the inviting logo on the side of the San Antonio Food Bank truck.

As soon as we were set up, they would sign in and receive a shopping cart filled with groceries. Speed and efficiency were our goals. Get them food and get them out. We were fast.

A better way

It troubled me that our rush prevented us from truly ministering to the people God had sent our way. Feeding the hungry is a good, Christ-honoring thing, but can we do it in a way that is more life affirming? Furthermore, people were given food they might not particularly desire,

such as a 2-gallon bladder of latte or a case of frozen pie. There had to be a better way.

There was. We changed to a client-choice food pantry, open twice a week, out of our desire to make a better relational connection with our neighbors. Everyone who comes into the pantry sits with a minister to fill out the paperwork. If the client has other needs, further resources are provided or recommended.

More importantly, the ministers offer a listening ear, words of comfort and prayer in an unhurried atmosphere. Often, people who find themselves in grim circumstances feel unwanted and unheard.

After the interview and prayer, the client is awarded a number of points based on family size. The client then enters our little store and selects the items they want from an assortment of dry goods and fresh produce.

A better way for Ben

After a little research, the minister determined Ben did have benefits available. But for Ben to receive his benefits, he needed a bank account in which to deposit funds. That required an ID card. People experiencing homelessness need ID cards to find work, housing and federal benefits but often lack the supporting documents, residential address and money for fees.

Once the ID card was acquired, the next challenge was a mailing address to receive his debit card. So, Baptist Temple became his mailing address, and we diligently awaited the arrival of the plastic card that would lead to housing for Ben. Meanwhile, he slept under the awning.

It took a lot of steps to find housing for Ben. This would have been an overwhelming task to tackle alone. People living on the streets lack the

connection of friends and family to help them through tough times. Life can be challenging to navigate alone as problems and setbacks snowball into catastrophe.

The Bible advises, “Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor. If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up” (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10, NIV).

Networking, a key component of business success, is essential for social survival. Baptist Temple stepped in, becoming that network for Ben.

Of course, the issue of homelessness is complex, especially when addiction and mental illness come into play, but there are some things we can do to help. Jesus taught us, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40, NIV).

Rev. Jorge Zayasbazan is the senior pastor of Baptist Temple in San Antonio. The views expressed in this opinion article are those of the author.