

HUNGER AND HOMELESSNESS

The three basic human necessities, food, clothing, and shelter need to be met in order for a person to develop physically, mentally, and socially. It is only after these three basic needs are in place that a person can look beyond oneself in order to participate in and for the good of the wider society. It is truly unconscionable that in America we have hungry and homeless adults and children living in the shadows right in the places we call home. Our time together will be spent uncovering the invisible in our midst, naming the reasons that contribute to hunger and homelessness, and to ask ourselves, "As Christians and concerned citizens, do we have a personal responsibility to the hungry and homeless in our neighborhoods?" And if so, "What might that be?"

1. **Making the Invisible Visible: Myth busting the perceptions we have been taught about the poor.**

- a.) In this country there is an 80% poverty rate. The count of homeless students enrolled in American schools, is now more than 1.3 million, and that is nearly double what it was a decade ago. There are 3,000 homeless children in 9 western Pennsylvania counties and that number does not include children who are not enrolled in public school. The average age of homeless in Mercer County is age 7. The Good Shepherd in Greenville, Pa. serves on average 34 new clients per week. The average age of a homeless person is 40. The largest ethnicity percentage of homeless (49%) is African American. Women make up 36% of the homeless population. 42% of the homeless have an income. 25% have reported a drug/alcohol problem. Homeless veterans, 29%.
- b.) Who are the poor? They are Children, Youth, Young Adults, Persons of middle age, and Elderly. They are male, female, white and people of color; straight, and GLBTQ. They are students. They are the employed, underemployed, and unemployed. They are educated, under-educated and uneducated; they are veterans, citizens, documented and undocumented workers. They are victims of domestic violence and victims of a broken economic system. They are those who come from affluent families, and those who grow up in poor circumstances. They are from rural and urban communities. Some have mental health issues, histories of substance abuse, and have criminal records, and many do not fit those categories at all. We think we can identify a homeless person, but we are mistaken. There is no definitive description and no one reason why they are living in poverty. A small percentage lives on the streets because they like that life style of having no responsibility.
- c.) Where do they live? They dwell in the shadows of rural and urban communities. They live in their cars, sleep in laundromats. They couch surf moving from friend to friend's apartments and homes. They sleep in dorm rooms of a friend or family member, under bridges, in homeless shelters, women's domestic shelters, rehabilitation facilities, in alleys, and public transportation stations and vehicles, they live behind walls, sheds, barns, and in plain sight.
- d.) What are their stories? Adults, Children and Youth, Students, and Elderly. Many are victims of abuse: physical, psychological, financial. Some become homeless after an economic crisis, due to loss of income, car accident; natural disaster. Some have an

inability to qualify for SSI disability. Some have low paying jobs to meet living expenses, but make just enough not to qualify for supplemental financial support. There are college students who lack the funding for meals and housing. They are victims of city zoning and planning that destroys low income housing without immediate replacement. Food stores are not willing to set up shop in local poor neighborhoods. There is inadequate foster care and shortage of social workers to accommodate all the children and parents who are in need.

2. **Poverty and the Opportunity Gap:** Suffering is unnecessary because we are a rich country. The top 1% of the rich is worth 70 times more than the lower classes & controls 43% of the wealth in the nation. The top 4% control 29% of the wealth. Therefore the top 5% of the control 72% of the country's wealth, and that figure has grown during the past 5 years. The driver of poverty is the systematic/systemic exploitation of the poor. The poverty industry is made possible when social service funds don't end up where they are supposed to. Private industry and even the government in some circumstances profits off the poor and disabled.
3. **Problems that need to be addressed:**
 - a.) Shortage of adequate affordable housing
 - b.) A livable income; raise the minimum wage
 - c.) Access to comprehensive health care before there is a costly humane crisis
 - d.) Equal access to quality education (funding of our public schools, adult education, and higher learning institutions, technical schools)
 - e.) Issues of transportation, public transportation improvements to serve those who live in poor or rural regions
 - f.) Issues of child care having to do with employment
 - g.) Racism, sexism,
 - h.) Job training/retraining
 - i.) Coaching opportunities for: family planning, how to manage money, nutrition the benefits of growing one's own food, and how to access the help that is available.
 - j.) Lack of family and social support system
 - k.) Chronic absences from work and school
 - l.) Fear of being labeled and ridiculed
 - m.) Family separation
 - n.) Rural isolation
 - o.) Pride
 - p.) Social service and educational funding cuts
 - q.) Housing and Urban Development abuses
 - r.) Learning biases
 - s.) Greed

4. Greed and Poverty: What has our role been?

a.) NOT SPEAKING UP!

1. Condoning for profit education
2. Complaining about raising taxes to support public education
3. Not supporting a livable minimum wage
4. We don't appreciate low income housing in our neighborhoods
5. We have misperceptions about the poor
6. We are not aware of the difficulties of getting out of poverty
7. We do not live out the responsibilities of our faith to love and to share

b.)As Christians and concerned citizens, do we have a personal responsibility to the poor in our neighborhoods? If so, what is it? What does our faith say is our responsibility?

c.) What steps can we take as Members of the Penn West Conference of the United Church of Christ to combat poverty? Engage in Penn West Conference and United Church of Christ justice and witness teams; by subscribing to their email alerts for action.

WHAT IS BEING DONE IN OUR COMMUNITIES TO HELP RIGHT NOW?

AGENCIES WORKING FOR JUSTICE

1. Homeless Children's Education Fund for homeless students
2. Quest Bridge which connects bright low income students with elite colleges and Universities; careful here because even though they pay for tuition there is still inadequate funding for books and food putting strains on college students.
3. Operation Safety Net operationssafetynet@pittsburghmercy.org
4. Departments of Health and Human Services, Department of Aging
5. Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank and Food serving many counties in western Pennsylvania at local food pantries
6. The Women's Shelter for Domestic Violence and Bethlehem Haven a homeless women's shelter
7. Neighborhood Legal Services Association
8. Northside Common Ministries
9. Light of Light Mission
10. Salvation Army
11. Local church opportunity shops offering clothing and household items for those in need.

12. Food Think Tank: Good Food Org. Guide includes five locally based groups: Just Harvest, 412 Food rescue, Grow Pittsburgh, the Southwestern Pennsylvania food Security Partnership, and Hunger-Free Pennsylvania.
13. Local gardening projects for fresh vegetables
14. CSA Farms
15. School feeding programs
16. Cell phones for safety projects
17. Northside Homeless Alliance

HOW CAN WE HELP?

1. Watch for instances of unfair economic, educational and social services and speak out for injustices. Doing nothing is not helpful.
2. Be a political advocate for the poor. Call or write a personal letter to your representatives to make your voice known. (Emails and group sign ups do not work.)
3. VOTE your Christian conscience to bring “Good news to the poor” not your political affiliation
4. Be Aware of your surroundings to identify and report to social services or law enforcement those who you strongly suspect do not have regular housing or food
5. Create programs in your church groups to build awareness such as sending people out to the grocery with \$20.00 to buy food to serve a family of 4; see what they bring back and how far it can go, and see how healthy it is.
6. Locate social service opportunities in your neighborhood; donate and volunteer. Volunteering is the only way you will get the reality of the situation, and understand ways you can really be of help.
7. Become a member of “Standing Firm: The Business Case to End Partner Violence” Standing Firm encourages employers to follow three action steps to address the domestic violence problem: Recognize, Respond, Refer. Visit www.standingfirmwpa.org to learn more.

Educate yourself on the issues: Suggested books: “Busted” America’s Poverty Myths by Brooke Gladstone; The Poverty Industry: The Exploitation of America’s Most Vulnerable Citizens; Evicted: Poverty & Profit in the American City by Matthew Desmond; \$2.00 a day: Living on Almost Nothing in America by Kathryn Edin and H. Luke Shaefer. Check out the online interview from NPR October 2016 with Jack Frech who believes poverty is unnecessary.