

**October 14, 2007** • Guest column: Concern for homeless has personal roots • by **Rev. Guy A. Blair**

After the Green Bay City Council closed the homeless shelter at St. John the Evangelist Church, a TV reporter asked me what motivated my concern for the homeless. At that moment I felt trapped, not because I didn't have an answer, but I wasn't ready to reveal my "heart." I gave an honest theological/spiritual response: Jesus had instructed his followers to take care of those in need, it is what a church community should do, and for two seasons we had taken our Lord's words to heart and done what he had requested.

The actual reason for my compassion toward the homeless hurt too much to blurt out, but now it seems the right time to speak as I ponder the words of Ecclesiastes: "There is a time to plant and a time to pull up plants. There is a time to be silent and a time to speak" (Ecc. 3:2, 7b).

At one time my parents, in their 60s, were homeless. Their experience as homeless people changed my perception of "homeless" as a problem to be solved into "homeless" as a person. Often sleeping in their car and eating when they had money, they opened a world to me I never knew but came to understand can happen even to those who are careful and trusting. Their homeless stature came about because of a family issue — a family issue that will fade with their passing.

Our family (a brother and four sisters) all thought they were enjoying a vacation traveling south — there were even postcards! Never a hint or betrayal by tone of voice led me to suspect anything different. They were living on the road, I should say "suffering" on the road, and I had no idea of my parents' predicament.

Not until they "settled down" and invited me for a visit to their new "home," an old trailer bought with the meager settlement from the family "issue," were my eyes opened. When we sat down and I listened to the real story, my anger, tears, guilt were overridden by the exquisite love of parents who didn't want us to worry and had decided not to burden us.

The thought of my parents sleeping in their car, eating when they could afford to, and trying to travel on Social Security income left its indelible mark. Among the many questions I asked was: "Why had you not told me of your circumstances?" It was to save the reputation of a family member and keep family unity — the abiding love that only parents possess.

Twenty-five years later, they now live very simply, but I often wonder how many other older Americans are forced into similar circumstances.

At St. John's homeless shelter, we treated each person with respect. There were strict rules that had to be enforced, but we never lost sight that each individual was a person, not a problem. Perhaps unknown to the general public were all the updates we were making to the building at the request of the city to meet codes, the installation of stainless steel in the kitchen and an upgrading of our electrical system. A handicapped-accessible bathroom in addition to another bathroom; we have four showers, a 36-foot handicapped-accessible entrance ramp — all this accomplished by donations of generous people. Clothing, bedding and food poured into the shelter. Two full-time, paid employees were on duty and many, many volunteers made and brought food and served it and interacted with the homeless people.

There is no logical reason for the homeless shelter at St. John's to be closed, except for the decision of bureaucrats who feel it is in the wrong section of the city and does not fit in with their plan of condos along the riverfront and taxpaying folks who are not a problem to be solved. We were a "turn-key" operation that existed to help those who couldn't find aid anywhere else.

We were helping to make Green Bay safer by giving shelter to people who roamed the streets at night and who might get themselves arrested on purpose just to get a warm place to sleep and a meal. The homeless were also being protected from frostbite and the ravages of winter's night temperatures and trips to the emergency room.

The shelter was in close proximity to the Crisis Center and hospitals; the police brought people to us. All this at no cost to the taxpayer. As I said, there was no logical reason for the closure of our shelter.

The reason we existed was because the New Community Shelter did not deal with the population of homeless we welcomed and said they were at capacity anyway. For two seasons we did the right thing.

However, as I read further in the Book of Ecclesiastes: "Here is something else in this life — that it isn't fair." (Ecc10:5a)

We, the Brown County Churches Offering Temporary Shelter, have done our best and will continue to aid, in whatever way we can, those who, for whatever reason, become homeless.

As for me, I have seen people of my parent's age at our shelter, and I thank God we were there to help, just as someone else helped my parents.

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