



## WHY THE CHURCH NEEDS TO BE IN RELATIONSHIP WITH FAMILIES

*“It is in our intimate relationships with our friends on the streets... that open our blinded eyes to really see Jesus for who he is. Through their desperation and forced vulnerability, they help us see what intimacy with God looks like. We are compelled to follow our friends who are poor to God’s heart.” -Christopher Heuertz*

**Bridge of Hope calls churches** from diverse Christian faith traditions to support families facing homelessness. It is out of this calling that we highlight the following reasons why the Church today needs to be in relationship with homeless single mothers and their children:

- 1.) **God calls the Church to relationships:** God longs to be in right relationship with us and to see us in right relationship with each other. Homeless families remind us that our relationship with God is more than just a private response to the God of the universe. A vital relationship with God also means being in vital relationships with those around us. Throughout Scripture God identifies with the poor to the point that caring for those in need is like taking care of God (Matthew 25:31-46). Rev. James Forbes once said that to get into heaven, the faithful are going to need a letter of reference from the poor. Mother Teresa would often say that the poor are Jesus in distressing disguise. “The Scriptures teach that God’s faithful people share God’s special concern for the poor.... God insists that if we do not imitate his concern for the poor we are not really his people—no matter how frequent our worship or how orthodox our creeds” (Ron Sider). When we enter into authentic relationship with a mother and children who are facing homelessness and are able to see through their lens, it is surprising how often our eyes are open anew to the presence of Jesus in the world. These relationships challenge our judgments, assumptions, and individualistic mindset and teach us much about our relationship with God and with all God’s children.
- 2.) **God calls the Church to bless others:** God’s directive, throughout Scripture, is that the provision we experience from God is not only meant for our own sakes but also for the sake of those around us. We are blessed to bless others (Genesis 12:1-3). We dare not mistake “God’s financial blessings as individual provision rather than resources with potential for kingdom development.” (Heuertz) For the children of Israel, that meant caring for those around them who were in need, including the foreigner, the poor, and the widows. Today the church is also being called to be a blessing to single mothers and children who are homeless because we ourselves have so often been blessed. As the Apostle Paul writes so clearly (II Corinthians 8-9) we are to use our riches to help others and as we do, God in turn provides for the Church’s needs. It is the mystery and joy of God’s economy.
- 3.) **God calls the Church to vulnerability:** Just as Jesus chose to give up power for the sake of God’s call to serve humankind (Philippians 2), the Church must also embrace and honor the marginalized and forsaken. The Church will only be effective as it becomes vulnerable and humble, meekly caring for others both within and outside the Church (Matthew 5:1-11). The suffering of the homeless humbles us. Their weakness instructs us. Their vulnerability reminds us of our own pride. As we experience authentic relationships with families facing homelessness, we are reminded of our own need for God and that we are not ultimately in control. In a sermon, John Wesley said, “One great reason why the rich in general have so little sympathy for the poor is because they so seldom visit them. Hence it is that one part of the world does not know what the other suffers” (Christine Pohl). Neighboring relationships with

families facing homelessness keep our hearts tender, open our eyes to moments of God's grace, and move us beyond self-centered purposes—bringing us back into a deeper relationship with Christ. “We must minister among and with the broken out of a posture of brokenness; it is the only way we will be accepted. When we realize that we have as much to learn as we have to offer, true Christ-like ministry will freely flow, community will develop, and we will be transformed” (Heuertz).

- 4.) **God calls the Church to be a renewed community:** When church communities commit to building neighboring relationships that provide tangible support and encouragement to families facing homelessness, they demonstrate obedience, experience transformation, and connect with Jesus in new ways that revitalize their faith. Churches that worship together as rich, poor, and middle class can experience spiritual and relational transformation and renewal. For Saint John Chrysostom and other early Church fathers and mothers, the Church was seen as the vehicle for mutual and meaningful hospitality with the poor and homeless and “was a significant context for transcending status boundaries and for working through issues of respect and recognition” (Pohl). When churches embrace a holistic gospel, lived out in mutuality and respect in the world, families facing homelessness can experience physical, social, emotional, and spiritual wholeness, and in turn renewal comes to the congregation. The grand vision of the New Testament (Revelation 7) describes a new community in heaven that transcends economic status, ethnicity, culture, and language. The old dividing lines of housed or homeless, black or white, middle class or poor, unemployed or employed are transformed in the realization of God's intention for humankind. By being a community of hope, healing, and renewal now, the Church becomes a promise of God's ultimate desire for the world.

SOURCES: *Simple Spirituality* (Christopher L. Heuertz, Intervarsity Press, 2008); *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Christine Pohl, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999); *In the Heart of the World* (Mother Teresa, MJF Books, 1997); *Genuine Christianity* (Ronald J. Sider, Zondervan, 1996); *The Register-Guard* (Diane Dietz, Eugene, OR, 2004)