

ISSUES AND ACTIONS

June, 2005



The Earth Charter

Recognize that peace is the wholeness created by right relationships with oneself, other persons, other cultures, other life, Earth and the larger whole of which we are a part. 14f.

SOME CREATIVE IDEAS OF WAYS TO IMPACT HOMELESSNESS

By Sister Marjorie Wakelin

Although the following article is about San Francisco, the purpose of this issue is to urge you to research your own city or town to find out what creativity is out there and perhaps find a way your people and friends can help. The SF Chronicle of April 24, 2005 had an article written by Mary McKinnon Ganz, entitled "A Week on the Streets, An Odyssey into the World of Homelessness." She, a ministerial intern, spent a week with San Francisco's homeless as part of the Faithful Fools Street Ministry. The following in part is her article of what she experienced as a Street Person. It is such an honest recounting that I thought it would be a shared insight for all of us:

The line at St. Anthony's Dining Room stretches all the way down the block on Golden Gate Avenue in San Francisco's Tenderloin. It moves not at all and I am left standing in front of the window where missing persons are displayed. I study the faces. 'Antonio, please come home, no questions asked. We miss you, Mom and Dad.' Pasted over one of the pictures so I could neither see the name or the face, was a NO TRESPASSING sign, the kind I slept under last night in the doorway of my church, the kind that authorizes police to move you out, arrest you, or write you a big fat ticket. Even here.

This was the beginning of my 8 day retreat, 7 nights Street Retreat with the Faithful Fools. (A Catholic Sister, Sister Carmen Barsody and the Reverend Kay Jorgensen bringing Catholic and Unitarian and Universalist training and traditions to the street ministry run this ministry. They welcome you to join them in their spiritual foolery.) I had slept out two nights already, it was in this line on the third day trying to peer around the paper and see the face behind the NO TRESPASSING sign, that I felt I was beginning to bear witness to the suffering that is here.

Since my last extended street retreat a year ago, I had heard that St. Anthony's feeds 300 more people a day (making a total of 2,400 daily). This year, the food is less attractive, less appealing, and just plain less. I learned from an official at the food program at Glide Memorial Church that the Department of Agriculture is no longer delivering surplus beans and instant potatoes to food banks because those staples are being shipped to soldiers in Iraq instead.

All of us (13), an artist, a lawyer, two nuns, five ministers, two seminarians, a playwright and a businesswoman, had committed to spend one week last month walking alongside the poorest people in San Francisco, sharing their food in the soup kitchens and hunting for shelter beds or for cardboard to put between us and the cold concrete. What is different is that now I know people on the streets as individuals, because they are members of the Faithful Fools. So during those few days, I was not just walking the walk of the homeless, I was:

- * Standing in line an hour for a meal, everything you own on your back or in your hands.
- * Wandering like a ghost until it was late enough or dark enough to find a sleeping place you hope is safe on the street until your shelter opens (6 pm for some, 8 pm or 10 pm for others).
- * Trying to balance the discomfort of dehydration against the discomfort of having to pee after the library closes.
- * Dropping your pack and your sleeping bag anywhere you can find to put them down, knowing that you're taking up too much space.
- * Sitting in the library to get out of the rain. Trying to stay awake so the security guards don't make you go out for some air.
- * Panhandling for quarters to dry a sleeping bag, which got wet in last night's downpour. Having to choose between a meal and a shower because there isn't time to stand in both lines.
- * And trying above all, not to get sucked into the vortex of despair that pulls at your spirit as you stand in the food lines or make your way to a place at the table with the food you are given. That was what I began feeling that day in the line at St. Anthony's.

The last night of the retreat Bruce slept there in the door way in solidarity with us. All of us under the NO TRESPASSING signs. The signs bear witness to the church's struggle (which it shares even with St. Anthony's) to figure out where the boundaries are that would keep us separate, how to reconcile them with our theology of connectedness. How to keep away the despair that winds through the food lines.

But the line was around our church. In it was Bernadette and Michael, a couple who came to the Church to help pay their rent. We had never seen them before. They were short because of a funeral. They were short because the truck broke down and the guy Michael has been doing day labor for did not have enough work for him this month. Their rent had a 48 hours eviction clause if they couldn't come up with the money. "I don't want to live on the streets," Bernadette said, we had just come off the streets ourselves, and it was Sunday morning.

San Francisco's Tenderloin Street Ministry, The Faithful Fools, is a charitable and educational organization created in 1998 to be present with and to address the existence of poverty in the midst of material wealth. Aware of our judgments, we seek to meet people where they are through the arts, education, advocacy and accompaniment.

STREET RETREATS SCHEDULE: June 18, August 20, September 17, October 15, November 19, December 17
For information, please contact us at the Faithful Fools Street Ministry, 234 Hyde Street (between Eddy and Turk),
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