

A photograph of a person sleeping on a wooden park bench. The person is wearing a grey coat and blue shoes. A yellow hard hat and a blue and white bag are resting on the bench next to them. The background shows a fence and some greenery.

# *Saving Souls and Solving Homelessness*

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 **FULLER**  
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

**D**o you ever wonder why you see the same persons homeless month after month or even year after year? Are you and your congregation carrying out some kind of homeless ministry throughout the year and witnessing little change?

Such lack of change is even more perplexing when you read or hear the increasing number of stories about how cities, counties, and states have significantly reduced homelessness within their jurisdictions through the combined actions of public and private partnerships that often include faith-based organizations and local congregations. Such stories note that the number of homeless persons in the US was nearly 800,000 in 2005 and is now under 600,000—a 30 percent decrease.<sup>1</sup> However, of the 578,424 persons who were homeless in 2014, 37 percent were families with children under the age of 18, and 17 percent were chronically homeless persons, who are the most visible, vulnerable, and ailing, and also likely to die while living on the streets.<sup>2</sup>

Eradicating homelessness and saving souls require us to carry out not just some but *all* of the following actions taken by the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:33–35:

1. He saw a man who was beaten on the side of the road, as did others.
2. He took pity (compassion) on the wounded man, while others passed by on the other side of the road.
3. He treated the beaten man's wounds with oil and wine and bandaged them.
4. He put the man on his own donkey and brought him to an inn to be taken care of.
5. He took two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper the next day, saying, "Look after him."
6. He stated that when he returned he would reimburse the innkeeper for any additional expenses.

Two verses later, Jesus told the inquiring man in the story, "Go and do likewise." The problem is that most congregations and church members do not fully "go and do likewise" for persons who are homeless.

**Churches and individuals often complete only the first three actions of the Good Samaritan in their homeless ministries:**

1. *He saw a man who was beaten on the side of the road, as did others.*

Seeing homeless persons on the side of the road has become a common experience, particularly

in urban areas: when we stop at a red light while driving, pump gas at a gas station, come out of a store or restaurant, or walk along the sidewalk going to work.

2. *He took pity (compassion) on the wounded man, while others passed by on the other side of the road.*

We often have compassion for a person experiencing homelessness that we see in a disheveled state, looking hungry, missing a limb, or with a child or children. Our feeling sorry for the person only heightens if the homeless person tries to engage us by looking directly at us or asking for food or money.

3. *He treated the beaten man's wounds with oil and wine and bandaged them.*

When a homeless person engages us in some way, we often bandage the wounds, so to speak. We may give money or buy the person food if asked. We may go with other church members to a park or street corner and pass out food and clothing.

**However, we usually stop there.**

Immediately after giving the homeless person some provisions, individuals or congregations too often leave the person on the side of the road. They don't make it to steps four, five, and six—helping the person get to a place where he or she will be cared for longer term. As a matter of fact, sometimes they leave the same person on the side of the road time and time again, every month, or however often they conduct their homeless ministry. They keep bandaging the same wounds but leaving the person right where they were.

So how can we follow the Good Samaritan's example to, in effect, bring homeless individuals to an inn where they will find the care they need? I believe we can do this through practices that link homeless persons with affordable housing without preconditions.

**Homelessness can be significantly reduced by implementing evidence-based best practices.**

We have seen a significant decrease in homelessness in jurisdictions implementing evidence-based best practices—the primary ones being *permanent supportive housing* combined with a *Housing First* approach and *rapid rehousing*.

**Permanent Supportive Housing**

Permanent supportive housing refers to housing



specifically designed for chronically homeless persons and other highly vulnerable homeless families and individuals, and it is provided along with ongoing supportive services. These persons have long histories of homelessness and face persistent obstacles to maintaining housing, such as a serious mental illness, a substance use disorder, and/or a chronic medical problem. They need long-term supportive services and rental assistance, which enables them to pay for the balance of their rent in order to stay housed.

### ***Housing First***

Housing First is an effective approach for persons who have experienced chronic homelessness because the shelter system cannot meet their needs. The Housing First approach promotes permanent supportive housing that is offered without preconditions such as sobriety, minimum income threshold, or service participation requirements, but it also encourages case management and related services. Ongoing evaluations of this approach to housing have demonstrated its effectiveness for chronically homeless individuals and families with health care, mental health, and substance abuse issues because ongoing services help them maintain their permanent supportive housing.

### ***Rapid Rehousing***

Offering housing without preconditions is also a characteristic of rapid rehousing, a model designed to help homeless individuals and families to move as quickly as possible into permanent affordable housing and achieve stability in that housing. Rapid rehousing assistance is time-limited, individualized, and flexible. It is also designed to provide the level of supportive services needed for households to ultimately maintain their housing with their own resources.

Rapid rehousing also applies a Housing First approach by housing households—particularly families with children under age 18—in order to avoid shelters if at all possible. If families do go to a shelter, the goal is to rapidly rehouse them by not requiring preconditions for their housing.

### **Offering affordable housing without preconditions is a lot like grace.**

These best practices contrast with a “housing-ready” model in which shelter residents must address various issues (e.g., substance abuse) that led to their homelessness prior to entering housing. This older

model requires treatment and compliance in exchange for help obtaining housing. Thus, shelter residents must earn their housing and may be discharged back onto the streets for not having done so and/or for breaking shelter rules.

God bestows grace not because of anything we have done to earn it. It is totally undeserved and freely given out of God’s love. This kindness from God is simply a gift.

### ***Seeking Righteousness***

Churches have taken two primary approaches concerning homeless ministry: calling for the homeless person to seek righteousness or for church members to seek righteousness.

The first approach uses food and clothing as part of an exchange to witness or evangelize. The providers urge homeless persons to seek God’s kingdom and righteousness first, and then all these things, such as food and clothing, will be given to them, including money for rent and other necessities (Matt 6:33; Luke 12:31).

The second approach involves church members’ seeking righteousness, based on the belief that giving food, clothing, or money to the poor is a giving to Christ: “whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Matt 25:40).

I believe the church hinders the salvation of both homeless persons and church members by not providing affordable housing. Expecting the needy to “seek God’s kingdom and righteousness first” in order to receive housing can dangerously shift into a punishment paradigm. It implies that homeless persons are not seeking God’s righteousness enough, otherwise more of their basic needs would be met.

### ***Carrying Out the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Actions of the Good Samaritan***

Christ said, “I was a stranger and you invited me in.” Inviting a person to stay within your own home may not be prudent for safety reasons. However, helping the person obtain appropriate housing would be a righteous thing to do. Giving money directly to the homeless person for rent after finding housing is also not prudent. The wiser action is to directly pay the property owner or the case manager, which is an integral part of the Housing First approach.

In addition, one can give the person—and thus Christ—tangible necessities rather than money. If

the person does not have to pay for a bed, table, and/or chairs, their limited income can go to their rent. Household furnishings are not practical gifts for someone without a home, but are immensely helpful as soon as the person is housed.

### ***Saving Souls and Solving Homelessness through Grace—All Six of the Good Samaritan's Actions***

Between 80 and 90 percent of homeless persons maintain the housing they receive through a Housing First approach.<sup>3</sup> This surprising positive outcome occurs because homeless persons do not have to address the issues that led to their homelessness while still living on the streets in order to *obtain* housing. They deal with these issues while housed in order to *maintain* the housing.

The Housing First approach requires keeping the rules common to all renters, but without the very strict rules of shelter programs. Furthermore, people may violate some rules while they are addressing the issues that caused their homelessness, but before any eviction they have the chance to work out problems with the help of case managers or other supportive services staff. For Christians, the Housing First model is a lot like God's grace. A Christian may do things contrary to spiritual growth. God, however, gives a lot of latitude, maintaining the relationship and working

with us for future growth.

Congregations can save souls and solve homelessness as a single whole. Saving souls is best accomplished when Christians go beyond the first three actions of the Good Samaritan; solving homelessness calls for Christians to include the last three actions of the Good Samaritan.

### **ENDNOTES**

1. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *The 2014 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress*, October 2014; <https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/2014-AHAR-Part1.pdf>.
2. Ibid.
3. "Housing First Model," on the Pathways National website: <https://pathwaystohousing.org/housing-first-model>.

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