

New York's Homeless Pastor

Since 1987, Diane Dunne has fed, clothed and cared for her homeless flock while churches in the city ignored her work.

Feisty and street-savvy, with a heart as deep as the skyscraper canyons where she ministers, Diane Dunne extends the hand of Jesus to the poor and needy in New York City and the suburbs of Long Island. Practicing radical Christianity, she toils 15-hour days to steer a massive feeding program while also preaching on the street rain or shine.

"We have church without walls," she says. "Most people we deal with have given up on man and God."

Her unconventional church, Hope for the Future Ministries, served 100,000 hot meals and distributed 300,000 bags of groceries last year.

On Wednesday afternoons about 300 neighborhood people gather on the sidewalk near the corner of Avenue C and Ninth Street on Manhattan's Lower East Side. Seniors, the homeless and unemployed, hip-hop kids, and single mothers sit in rows of white plastic chairs. They wait for a sermon before lining up for bags loaded with muffins, canned goods, cereal, eggs, milk and cheese.

John, 79, relies on the food. His only income is a monthly \$560 Social Security check. A woman named Irene has little income because she isn't able to work full time. "Most of my money goes to pay rent. This is a godsend that I'm able to get food here."

Dunne belts out her sermons in a Brooklyn twang without using a microphone. She relates easily, eschewing religious-speak. She's real, and her street congregation knows that.

"People love her a lot," says another woman, Anna. "It's not

so much because they are getting something. It's because she cares enough to come and do it."

Dunne began the ministry in 1987. She had been listening to a preacher in the city's Tompkins Square Park when she attempted to befriend a homeless woman named Alaska.

"What do you know what it's like to be homeless!" Alaska had screamed at her. That scream reamed Dunne's soul.

She returned to the park regularly giving sandwiches to the squatters who lived there. Months later, Alaska invited Dunne to her new apartment in an abandoned building. She lived in filth with other squatters and numerous cats and dogs. The stench from a metal drum containing human waste was overpowering.

God challenged Dunne: "If you can see these conditions and do nothing, it's sin."

"That day I made a commitment to help these people," Dunne told Charisma. She had become a born-again Christian several years before that and had quit a lucrative career in cosmetics.

"I got hooked up in the world and making money and trying to be a success," she said. "And God just stopped everything on me."

Without fanfare she began feeding from a pushcart.

"I would clean construction sites to raise money to buy food," she said. Connections to donated food supplies followed. She runs her ministry with only three full-time staffers. She has help from an army of volunteers, who pick up, sort and prepare tons of food for the four weekly outreaches she organizes. She squeaks by on an annual income of \$24,000.

"I live by faith," she says. "You don't buy things you don't need."

Five years ago she lived in a warehouse. "I told God on my 41st move, 'I am not leaving this warehouse until You give me a house.'" Miraculously, she received money for a down payment on a townhouse that she bought through a foreclosure sale.

Danger and accusation come in all shapes. She has been punched, cursed and has endured having plates of food thrown at her. She once backed down a knife-wielding street tough by calling his bluff.

"Go ahead," she demanded. "You want to stab me? I go to heaven—you go to jail."

Single and slender, she looks much younger than her 48 years. Her appearance generates cruel rebukes sometimes. One Pentecostal pastor told her: "You're not a Christian. You wear pants."

"I'm supposed to be old, fat and frumpy," she says. "I'm not supposed to be cool."

She knows how it feels to be the victim of gender prejudice.

"Doors don't open to speak or raising money because I'm a woman. If you're a woman, you've got to work twice as hard in the body of Christ," she says.

She thrives on action and marshals her volunteers like a drill sergeant.

"I could be a little tough with people," she admits. "I come out here, and I go into a whole different mode. I go into street mode."

Street evangelism is never dull. Once, while feeding 400 homeless people in Tompkins Square Park, a riot erupted. A troublemaker then challenged her. "Where is your God now?" he mocked.

Holy Spirit boldness boiled inside her as she shouted

heavenward, "Let it rain, Lord!" Minutes later a downpour quelled the riot.

Another time her preaching was stifled when a man in a black robe appeared. "He had these blue lizard-like eyes," she says. He was a high priest in the occultic Frog coven.

Pleading the blood of Jesus, she continued preaching but asked Christians to circle the man and pray in tongues. When the man continued to distract the service, she asked the crowd to sing the hymn, "Oh, the Blood of Jesus."

"We started to sing, and that man went running like a bat out of hell," she says.

Dunne's dog, Hope, accompanies her everywhere. She has plopped Hope into the arms of hostile street people and watched their anger melt like butter.

"This dog can make people that hate dogs love her," she says. "She's my sweetness. She gives me cuddles when I have a hard day."

She experiences emotional valleys during which she says she feels "very alone." She gets discouraged because she doesn't have a permanent church building and has to watch seniors in wintertime freezing while they wait in line for their grocery bags. She admits she's fought with God.

She also conducts more funerals than weddings.

"I bury a lot of people," she says.

Seniors die of old age and cancer. The homeless die of illnesses spawned by AIDS, drug overdoses, and pneumonia and tuberculosis in the winter.

She has tried to rent space in churches but has been turned away. One pastor told her, "I don't want those kind of people in my building." Another church denied her request to store

chairs.

Her dream is to have a building for worship services and a place for food distribution, literacy training, youth ministry and a senior-citizens center. The going rate for a building in Manhattan is \$1 million, however.

"I need a miracle. We need a building because you can do a lot more with people in a building than you can do outside," Dunne says.

"I love these people," she adds. "My greatest satisfaction is when I see someone come to Jesus and their life is totally turned around. It gives me the courage to go on."

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For more information about Diane Dunne's outreach in New York, write Hope for the Future Ministries, 131 Verdi St., Farmingdale, NY 11735; or call (631) 752-5771. Send tax-deductible contributions to Christian Life Missions, P.O. Box 952248, Lake Mary, FL 32795-2248.