

Shelter from the Storm

Homeless people in San Francisco know where to find a good meal and a warm bed. They look for the bus with their name on it.

On board a shabby old bus, pastor Evan Prosser belts out words from a classic hymn: "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me."

Those famous words take on startling poignancy when one looks around the bus. Dirty, smelly "wretches," some with eyes glazed by drugs and alcohol, mouth the words that speak of hope for the hopeless.

Welcome to The Homeless Church of San Francisco. Perched on lofty hills surrounding a breathtaking bay, San Francisco is a city of outstanding beauty, yet it harbors despondency beyond measure.

The Homeless Church meets in the bus six nights a week for Bible study and worship. It's an unconventional church, born from a vision God gave Prosser 10 years ago when he was pastoring a "normal" church in Northern California's farm country.

"I was driving along I-5 when I heard God's voice," Prosser, 62, explains. "God said: 'I want you to start a church for the homeless in San Francisco—not a missions project but their own church, a church they can call their own and take ownership of.'"

In 1994, Prosser and his wife, April, also 62, resigned from the church

and headed south for the “Golden Gateway” city, where in their pre-Jesus days of the 1960s they had lived as hippies. The Prossers were convinced that God did not want them to put their efforts into a shelter or a counseling program, the ministry models favored by many homeless missions. Instead, He was calling them to live among the destitute, to fully identify themselves with the lowest of the low, to actually become “part of their world.”

And they have. Today, Evan and April live in a decrepit 1964 GMC school bus, parked among the homeless in their community. With threadbare sheets pegged up across the windows for curtains, the Prossers’ cramped home contains virtually nothing in the way of material comforts.

“We have cast in our lot with them,” Evan says.

Like those around them, the Prossers are being “moved on” regularly by the city police. In this way, too, they are identified with the homeless.

“Just after we’d moved into the bus, I was putting some trash into a dumpster,” Evan recalls. “A guy came marching over and yelled: ‘Hey! That dumpster isn’t for people like you!’

“I was taken aback, but then I suddenly realized that, yes, I was now one of ‘those people.’ And, you know, at that moment I felt kind of proud.”

A police officer once approached the Prossers’ bus and ordered them to “move that piece of junk.”

“When Evan mentioned he was a pastor and tried to explain what we were doing, the officer said, ‘Save that for your congregation,’” she recalls.

As she says this, a woman of about 40, her mind fried by drugs, yells frantically from across the street.

“When we came here, she was such an attractive young lady, very popular. Everyone liked her,” April explains. “The street eats people up pretty quick.”

As the troubled soul across the street rants, Evan summarizes her tragic story—one all too familiar here, where on any given night an estimated 14,000 homeless people roam the city streets.

“Her family lives in the Midwest,” Evan says. “They’ve come here, tried to help her.”

In despair, they returned home with the heart-wrenching image of their loved one—a daughter and a sister—tormented day and night on the streets. Despondency and discouragement surround the Prossers, but they do not see their neighbors as worthless, human “trash,” as many other people do.

“The homeless,” one San Francisco resident tells Charisma plainly, “spoil our city. They make it dirty.”

The Prossers see the addicts, the prostitutes and the hopeless through the eyes of Jesus, the one who had “no place to lay His head,” according to Matthew 8:20.

“Yes, I see people who are beaten up, dissed and defeated,” Evan says, looking out across the rolling city landscape.

“But ‘there’s gold in them thar hills,’” he adds, echoing the pioneers’ cry of the mid-1800s, when gold was discovered in the region.

“Beneath the brokenness, we’re finding nuggets of gold right here on the streets, people coming to faith in Jesus and being healed by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

Three years ago, a failed marriage pushed James Woods over the edge. He joined the homeless of San Francisco—where the average studio apartment costs \$1,500 a month in rent—aimlessly pushing a shopping cart through the city streets.

“When I looked down at my cart, I suddenly realized what I had become,” Woods recalls. “I saw my reflection in a window—a sunken, old man with a grizzly beard, pushing a cart. I started to sob and cried out, ‘Jesus, help me!’”

At this crisis point, Woods was invited to stay at one of two “healing homes” donated to The Homeless Church—homes where destitute men and women can clean up, avoid harmful influences and “soak in Jesus,” as the Prossers put it.

“When I showed up, I was filthy, smelly and a total mess,” Woods says. “April came to the door and said: ‘Are you James? We’ve been expecting you.’ That just tore me up, to think that someone actually wanted to see me.”

Today, Woods is a pastoral assistant at The Homeless Church, which is affiliated with the Assemblies of God.

Margaret Billsborough, 37, a mother of seven, experienced abuse, addiction, prostitution, fits of rage and jail time—winding up on the streets. “I lost everything. All my children went to foster homes,” she says.

Billsborough found refuge at The Homeless Church last year. “April and Evan opened their arms to me,” she says. “Now I have Jesus, and God is bringing me and my children back together.”

A little more than four years ago, Agustin García was drinking himself into oblivion on the streets when the Prossers came by. “They came every day, talking about Jesus all the time,” he recalls.

When it hit 40-year-old García that Jesus wanted to set him free, he grasped the opportunity to repent and be baptized in the Holy Spirit. Now, no longer living on the streets, he hungers to share Christ with San Francisco’s down-and-outers.

“I want to tell them that there is hope—and His name is Jesus,” he says.

On Friday nights, García and others from the church head to the beach, where they light a bonfire and share the gospel. During the week, church members give out pastries and coffee. Every Thursday night it’s “soup and Jesus.”

But it’s aboard The Homeless Church’s two buses that many

spiritual breakthroughs occur. That's where the homeless come to their church, study the Bible and unload their burdens.

For Tommy, in his 30s, this is the first time at The Homeless Church. As he reads aloud from Job 15, he stops: "This is right where I'm at now," he declares. "I want to make a new start."

Evan leads Tommy and others on the bus in prayer. Again, the wonderful words of "Amazing Grace" seem to soar to new heights from the battered old bus: "When we've been there 10,000 years, bright shining as the sun."

"It would be easy to glamorize the so-called sacrifice we've made," Evan says. "But we're having the time of our lives. We could not be doing anything more fulfilling than this. God is right here."

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For more information, call 415-468-1690 or visit
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