

Vineyard Church Offers Hope and Helping Hands to the Homeless

Pastor Marty Harris says his innovative outreach is an “emergency room” for people who have fallen through the cracks. A church for the homeless in Southern California and an outreach shelter to the same in New Mexico are setting examples for ministries to follow and inspiring others to respond to Jesus’ command to help the helpless.

Marty Harris, a psychologist and associate provost at a Christian university in Orange County, Calif., pastors one of the few churches in America whose congregation is mostly homeless.

“I had no experience in this type of thing,” said Harris, who leads the Vineyard Homeless Church in Santa Ana. “I used to be afraid of homeless people. My mom taught me to walk on the other side of the street if you saw one. Now some of my best friends are schizophrenic and homeless. Experiencing a friendship with people like that has changed my world.”

The church often meets outdoors in front of the county courthouse or in a Presbyterian church’s fellowship hall. Ministry teams set up tables and prepare food, and one team goes out to round up a congregation. When the parishioners are gathered—a regular group of more than 100 street people—they worship together, hear a sermon, eat a hot meal and enjoy fellowship.

As much as he can, Harris offers practical help with struggles

such as criminal behavior, promiscuity, prostitution and drugs. About a third who attend are truly homeless. Another third are temporarily homeless, and the rest come from nearby apartments.

“Some are actively psychotic before and after services, but not during,” Harris said. “They won’t eat our food because they think it’s full of snakes. They will be hearing voices and yelling, then sit quietly through the service and help clean up. It’s their time with God.”

Harris earned a doctorate in clinical psychology and studied at Cornell University. Helping the homeless was the last thing on his mind when he accepted a professorship at Vanguard University in Costa Mesa, Calif. Then he was invited to speak at the church and “fell in love with the people.” He became their pastor four years ago.

For those in homeless ministry, the costs are great, but the benefits are greater. In Albuquerque, N.M., Jeremy Reynolds runs a homeless shelter for men, women and their families. Joy Junction serves as many as 6,000 people a year at its 52-acre campus and is the largest homeless shelter in the state.

“They provide an invaluable service to the city, county and state, all at no expense to the taxpayer,” said Albuquerque Mayor Martin Chavez in a letter of praise.

A typical stay at Joy Junction can be two to three months, and residents are required to attend Bible studies and participate in other activities essential to reintegration into mainstream society.

“I never had any idea that I would spend my life helping homeless families,” Reynolds said. “While providing meals and a place to stay are obviously an essential part of what we do, the most important thing we do is present Jesus to these folk who come to us for help.”

Back in Santa Ana, Calif., Harris’ homeless church is supported mainly from his own income, with insurance and food as the main expenses. He brings students and fellow faculty members to Sunday services.

“Many [students] are surprised by the number of homeless in Orange County and the prevalence of mental illness,” Harris said. “They realize how much they have and are grateful. Some even find their ... calling in the homeless church.”

There are many reasons for people becoming homeless, Harris said. They may have serious physical ailments, drug addictions or a poor work ethic. Many are mentally ill.

Harris’ approach to helping the homeless is as complex as their histories. Some can be transitioned into mainstream society. Others benefit from finding their families or getting care for mental illness. But others seem to defy assistance.

“You can’t force someone to seek medication, and sometimes they are unwanted by their families,” Harris said. “Sometimes you resolve that this is their quality of life and this is how they’ll worship. Maybe my role is not to make them better but to give them a chance to worship and connect with people.

“My hope and dream, of course, is never to have a homeless church—to come and nobody’s there. Our church is not the

ideal. It's the emergency room."

Joel Kilpatrick