

Homelessness in Ventura County

Those of us who are Unitarian Universalists are in covenant to affirm and promote the inherent dignity and worth of every person and that is one of the reasons we wanted to mark National Homeless Memorial Day by holding a service to remember those who have died homeless in our County.

Here is what we know about homelessness in Ventura County. In 2007, we counted 2,000 homeless adults and 300 homeless children in our county and this was probably a low estimate. There were 141 homeless families in the count. Two-thirds were men and one-third were women. Ten percent were young adults. Nearly half were born in California. The vast majority considered Ventura County home. Almost 600 were in the city of Ventura and 97 in Santa Paula.

Most of the homeless are not the people we see on the streets. One in every five residents of Ventura County has a household income that puts them at risk of becoming homeless. That is 20,000 people in the city of Ventura alone. We expect that we will see a rise in those numbers when the 2009 count is completed.

And so we remember today those who have died homeless in Ventura County. A few of the names we have are of people who may have been temporarily staying with someone but who were considered transient or homeless. A few died in shelters. Most of them died on the streets. One body was found in a dumpster. One on a city sidewalk. Several died in the river bed. The names have come to us from various agencies in the county.

Reflection

We know that death is part of life and that to everything there is a season, but a death caused or exacerbated by exposure to the elements or lack of access to medical treatment or hopelessness is not a natural part of life. Homelessness is hazardous to ones physical and mental

health. The oldest person on our list for 2008 was 67 and the next oldest was 58 years old. That is not natural. Yes, many of them suffered from addiction. And yet most of us who suffer from addiction or other illnesses sleep safely in our homes at night. We have access to medical care and we do not die on the streets.

Our candle here today is in need of shelter. So are our bodies and spirits in need of shelter, in need of a place of refuge.

All the world's religious traditions call us to care for one another.

From Christianity: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you, for this is the law and the prophets.

From Judaism: What is hurtful to yourself do not to your fellow man. That is the whole of the Torah and the remainder is commentary.

From Buddhism: Hurt not others with that which pains yourself.

All the world's religious traditions agree with the Christian statement that "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

From Taoism: Extend your help without seeking reward. Give to others and do not regret or begrudge your liberality. Those who are thus are good.

From Sikhism: In the minds of the generous contentment is produced.

From Islam: The poor, the orphan, the captive --- feed them for the love of God alone, desiring no reward, not even thanks.

And all the world's religious traditions tell us that as we sow, so shall we reap. What we put out into the world is what comes back to us. The results of what we have sown are not very pretty. We have more and more people who have no safe place to go. Homelessness is not the problem. Homelessness is the result of larger social problems and failures. Homelessness is the result of our failure to create a safety net

for our most vulnerable citizens. Homelessness is the result of not paying living wages and not providing affordable health care and housing.

And yet we have no year 'round shelter in this area. We have no sobering center. We have very few transitional living beds. The list of what we don't have is long. As the ad that many of my clergy colleagues and I placed in the paper this morning said, "It's 2008 and there is still no room at the inn."

I heard a story this week about someone tracing the steps that Mary and Joseph took to Bethlehem. In 2008, that trek requires that they pass through eight military checkpoints.

In spite of not offering viable alternatives, we actively enforce laws against asking for handouts, sleeping outdoors and even sleeping in cars. This, dear ones, has got to stop. It is hard enough to be down and out without having your poverty and homelessness considered a crime.

It is hard enough to be a law enforcement officer in this day and age without being asked to enforce inhumane laws that are created only because a community has failed its most vulnerable and doesn't want to face the consequences of that. Our church's project to end homelessness is called Lift Up Your Voice. The name is taken from a line in one of our hymns that tells us to lift up our voices and sing to the power of the faith, hope and love within. This is what we must do together. We must lift up our voices. We must speak truth to power. We must say together that homelessness is not a crime and that criminalizing poverty will never heal the human family. We must lift up our voices until we form a human chorus that cannot be ignored.

Until everyone has a place, we all must find our place in the plan to end homelessness in Ventura County. We can do better. We will do better.

Imagine no need for a homeless persons' memorial service. It's easy if

you try.