

In March of 2008, our congregation hosted the homeless community of Pottstown as part of a roving church ministry, Ministries at Main Street. Many members of the congregation participated as hosts on a nightly basis for the month, providing a hot evening meal and staying overnight as hosts. We provided for 12 to 28 people per night in an outreach experience that became a catalyst for a series of workshops. The following article appeared in The Mercury community newspaper about church members' perspective on the experience. Zion's again provided shelter to the homeless population in January of 2009.

Leap of Faith

Local church takes in homeless and members learn about themselves

POTTSTOWN — When the pastor of Zion's United Church of Christ first proposed a month of sheltering the homeless, he was unsure how the congregation would respond.

Zion's is a mainstream church with members who favor tradition over innovation. Like many in-town churches, the number of people in the pews on Sundays is not what it once was. Zion's sanctuary, known in town as "the old brick church," is a historic landmark, and members take great pride in both the building and the mission that comprises their identity.

And, while the congregation doesn't hesitate to send money to missionaries or answer calls for help from the local Cluster Outreach Center, the notion of opening the doors for a month to the homeless of Pottstown was different than anything they had done before.

"There were some worries about costs, damage to the building, ugly encounters, some fear of the unknown," said the Rev. Peter Nichols on the congregation's reaction to his proposal. "Those concerns were real, and I don't want to discount them."

"Of course there were concerns," said Vicki Jenkins, a Consistory member. "Damages, the cost, theft — and what if people here didn't support it? We were taking a risk."

In a congregation where bills often surpass donations, the question of what it would cost to heat the building during the night was an obstacle. But, on Nichols' recommendation, the Consistory voted unanimously to volunteer as a shelter.

"So often when we face the unknown, we have apprehensions about what might happen, but most of the time those fears never come into reality," wrote Nichols in a letter to the congregation. "What we found (in housing the homeless) was a group of people of varying ability and circumstances who at present find themselves without a home.

"The experience of hosting them for a month became a transforming experience for those who participated, and an experience that is changing how we view ourselves as a church," he said.

Church members who participated in the homeless project echoed Nichols' words.

“All I knew of the homeless was what I saw on TV,” said Jenkins, who spent several nights at the shelter, accompanied by her daughters. “I wondered if they would be violent. I was scared. But, I thought this was something I had to do, and I found them to be more polite than anybody I have ever met.”

“When I first heard our church was doing this, I thought it was great, but not for me,” said Connie Griesemer. “I thought it would not be in my comfort zone. But, I was very comfortable. Seeing what they were about did away with my fear. They are just people who are currently down on their luck and without a home.”

“I thought about this group of people as just ‘the homeless’ before I met them, but I saw they are people who have wants and needs and hurts like everybody else,” said Joan Clouser. “It was amazing to see how they bond together and treat each other. And, many of them move on, which makes you realize you’re helping them to get back on their feet.”

“They are so grateful for everything you do,” said Betty Nichols. “One morning, a few of them were waiting outside the door for a ride, and I said, ‘Good morning, did we do everything we could for you last night?’ Then, as I turned away, one of them called me back and said, ‘No one has ever cared to ask us that before. Thank you.’”

Zion’s provided the shelter for Ministries at Main Street for the month of March. Members of the congregation donated food, such as breakfast bars and coffee, and volunteers cooked and served an evening meal every night ranging from homemade soup to chicken pot pie to meatball sandwiches.

The number of people who sought shelter ranged from a low of 11 to a high of 24, in addition to one or two shelter workers who stayed each night. The turnout was higher than expected, which Nichols attributed to either the location or “word getting around that our food was pretty good.”

The Rev. Kork Moyer of Ministries at Main Street brought those needing shelter to the church in his van, although some walked to Hanover and Chestnut streets. The shelter ran from 10 p.m. to 8 a.m., when the guests either left on their own or were picked up by Moyer. Mattresses were laid out on the floor of the Sunday school basement, and two to three church members stayed every night, in addition to the regular shelter volunteers.

Those who stayed the night or served the meals were struck by the sense of community the homeless shared, despite their circumstances.

“I was most struck by the quiet,” said Nichols. “You have 25 or 26 people in a room, and if you looked the other way, you would think no one was there. They are exhausted by the effort to survive, yet they demonstrate a great caring for one another and a bond.”

“There was one couple that we talked to, and it was amazing to see the ups and downs, the things they went through,” said Jenkins. “I learned afterward that they got an apartment, and that makes you feel good, as if you helped them through a bad time.”

“I didn’t know what to expect,” said Calvin Miller. “I didn’t know if there would be problems, and I did hear a bit of a ruckus about 2 a.m. one of the nights I was here. I went to see what was going on, and it was just a guy yelling at another one for snoring.”

Paul Desch said after spending two nights at the shelter he offered a job in his landscaping business to one of the men.

“People stereotype them as lazy, but the guy that I took is far, far from lazy,” he said. Desch’s 15-year-old son came with him to the shelter to see what it was like, and “he talked about how accepting they are of their circumstances. He made the comparison that he has so much, but does not see it with the contentment that they do.”

“Some of them are homeless by choice, and they can’t wait to get back to the woods where they live in warmer months,” said Joe Brogley, who volunteered because his two daughters are church members. “They care so much about every little thing you do for them, it becomes fulfilling.”

Leroy Baldwin, president of the church Consistory, said the experience was an eye opener. “Now when I see someone on the street, I see them differently,” he said.

Members talked about the individuals they came to know, and the circumstances that brought them to the shelter. There was “Emily,” whose relative was driving a luxury car when she deposited her at the shelter. Emily has a mental illness and had stopped taking her medication. Back on her meds, she was soon back at home.

Nichols said he learned one of the men who has been homeless for years was an Eagle scout, an achievement that contrasts with the stereotype many place on the homeless.

Griesemer said she recognized one of the homeless men from years ago and had known his parents. Church member Steve Guy said he talked to a man who had graduated from high school with Guy’s wife, and up until a year ago, had been on the other side of the homeless divide.

The sense that “there but for the grace of God go I” was felt by many of the volunteers. “I needed to do this because I understood,” said Kim Staton. “When my husband and I lost our apartment, we had family to take us in. Not everyone does.”

Staton’s sister, Kristal Hober, said that at 19, she didn’t expect to see homeless people her age. “I have always had someone to take care of me,” she said, “and I didn’t realize other people my age would be in this situation. They were so grateful that I was willing to be there and help them ... that really touched me.”

Hober, Staton and their mother, Jenkins, are keeping up with the shelter clients they met by visiting them in the library or at their jobs. Others like Desch have offered individuals help, and the church as a whole is using the experience as a catalyst to carve out an expanded role in the community.

“We have done things before that helped people in other places, but this was finally in our own community,” said Stan Schollenberger.

“I was staggered by seeing an entire room filled with food that we had donated and knowing that every night was covered with a meal and people to stay,” said Court Smith. “The amount of support was tremendous.”

“I am proud of our church for opening its doors,” added Griesemer. “Kork (Moyer) said in a conversation that you have to wonder what good is a church building if people are protecting it instead of using it. We overcame that feeling and opened our doors.”

“The experience has left us with the feeling that we will not be afraid to take a risk,” said Deb Brauner, director of Christian education. “We have a new awareness. (Nichols) said that sometimes people are invisible to us, but the people who stayed here are not invisible anymore. We acknowledge them now, and they acknowledge us.

“There is a story that goes, ‘If there is a church and a diner in the same part of town, and they both close, which would be missed more?’ It makes you think. If that question was asked here in March, it would have been the church. We made a difference.”

“We would have been missed more.”

Editor’s note: Zion’s is using its experience hosting the homeless for a special revitalization project to re-examine and define the church’s role in the community as a servant church. The congregation is embarking on a series of discussion sessions on this theme beginning today.