



Community First!
A Program of Mobile Loaves & Fishes

Community First!

Taking someone off the streets, putting a roof over his head and a cup of soup in his stomach will not change the status of a homeless person. To no longer be homeless, a person must think of home as a matter of community, that home is about belonging, connectedness, and shared memory and that home involves relationships of trust.¹

People of all interests are ready to go all the way to “Community First!” We do not want to just provide “adequate housing” for the homeless, we want to establish a sense of community. To do this, a community is needed with revolutionary service and attention to needs at a fraction of the cost of traditional housing initiatives. The emphasis needs to be on love, respect, abundance, and acceptance. It needs to be based on Scripture’s meaning of “shalom”. Shalom describes a human at peace in all relationships: with God, oneself, other people, and the natural world.²

Let’s take a journey through the vision of such a place. There are three legs to this journey. The first leg is to understand what human beings need, the second is what is a home and why is it so important to us; and finally, why do we need “community” to address our needs from bottom to top and why “Community First!”.

As humans, we have physiological needs – the very basics to sustain life which include our spiritual needs and spiritual life. And we also have security, love and belonging needs, if not met we become fearful and suffer from social anxieties. The need for dignity and self-respect also are important to our healthy state of mind. God made us all with the same needs: rich or poor, educated or ignorant, American or Chinese. Community First! is vital to help the chronic homeless of Austin to fulfill many of these needs so our brothers and sisters will have the opportunity to meet the final need of self-actualization.

On to the second leg of our journey – what is a home? In the book “Beyond Homelessness”³, eight characteristics are used to describe home. Home is:

1. A place of permanence and familiarity – it endures over what is transient

¹ Steven Bouma-Prediger and Brian J. Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness – Christian Faith in a Culture of Displacement*, (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), p. xi

² Ibid, p. 208

³ Steven Bouma-Prediger and Brian J. Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness – Christian Faith in a Culture of Displacement*, (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), Chapter 2 The Meaning of Home, Section on “A Phenomenology of Home”

2. A dwelling place – it is more than a house
3. A storied place – it is made by the stories that have shaped it
4. A safe resting place – where we feel secure and at rest because of mutual respect
5. A place of hospitality – where we are at ease without fear
6. A place of embodied inhabitation – it is our habitat
7. A place of orientation – where our world is made meaningful
8. A place of affiliation and belonging – where we are loved and cherished

And why is home so important? Based on his ministry on the streets of Atlanta, Ed Loring⁴ maintains that:

- Housing comes first; until those who are homeless have a place to live, efforts to improve their lives -- materially or spiritually -- offer little chance of long-term success.
- Housing precedes employment because you can't hold down a decent job without secure housing, a good night's sleep, or an address.
- Housing also precedes sobriety, because the despair of homelessness will often need alcohol or drugs to numb the pain.
- Housing precedes education, because you can't do your homework sitting in a shelter or on a park bench.
- And Housing precedes both physical and mental health, because homelessness is a breeding ground for disease, and it makes you go crazy.
- Finally, housing precedes the justice struggle because the homeless cannot be expected to harness the energy to advocate for justice when they are expending all of their energy with the daily business of survival at the most basic level.

The last leg of our journey is to understand what community is. There are a number of ways that someone might define community. The bricks, windows, grass, streets, public buildings, stores are all important in building a community. More importantly, it is the people who make up the community that will lift up our brothers and sisters out of homelessness and on their way to self-actualization.

The community provides the framework that allows an inhabitant to find shelter and food, safety in his own home, and friendship in the relationships he can cultivate among the other inhabitants. He can build his self-esteem through activities sponsored by the organizers of such a community such as classes and other social events that help build self-confidence and demonstrate that he is respected. Once his basic needs are addressed he can dream big and know that he has the opportunity to fulfill his dreams.

⁴ Ed Loring, "Housing Comes First," *The Other Side* (May/June 2002): 32-33.

We cannot talk about the importance of community without speaking about the importance of food. For the majority of the world, the security of a local, sustainable and nourishing food supply rates just below housing as the most essential foundation upon which community life is established. From the first day man learned to cultivate his own food, community and culture were based on the local food supply. However, over the past century, America has lost its value for this type of food and, as a consequence; our community life has suffered immensely.

Today, many communities are discovering the rewards of being involved in growing, harvesting their own food, and sharing with neighbors. Community First! cultivates the sense of home:

- in a connection with our food supply
- in loyalty and affection for each other
- in shared ownership
- in our own identity
- in a connection to our geographical location
- being transformed by a healing community

Palliative Care for Those Living in Poverty?

Palliative care (from Latin palliare, to cloak) is any form of medical care or treatment that concentrates on reducing the severity of disease symptoms, rather than striving to halt, delay, or reverse progression of the disease itself or provide a cure. The goal is to prevent and relieve suffering and to improve quality of life for people facing serious, complex illness.

The above definition comes from Wikipedia. The advent of the hospice movement in the United States and the creation of medical practices dedicated to palliative care are two of the most important events of the 20th century. These advances have actually had a dramatic and positive impact on medical care in not only how we treat patients but perhaps even more importantly how we treat those impacted by the patient's disease.

So what if we treat poverty as the disease that it is? And homelessness being the greatest manifestation of poverty here in the United States. What if we began to focus on relieving the suffering of the symptoms of that disease? What if just for a moment in time we took our eyes off of the cure and focused only on this issue of suffering? To relieve the extraordinary suffering associated with poverty! Imagine!

What would be the impact on those who suffer and on those who are impacted by their suffering. Wow! We could be really on to something here. Don't doubt for a second that the impoverished plight of the homeless, as an example, does not impact all of us living in the same community; the burden on the emergency rooms, the burdens on the criminal justice system,

the burden on our downtowns. If we begin to merely relieve their suffering would it relieve the suffering of the community as a whole? Relieve, that is, not solve?

A community dedicated to the chronically homeless will give the inhabitants a sense of being placed – a connection, loyalty, affection, identity, ownership, a location, a home, a community. By giving the inhabitants the resources to produce their own food, protect the local ecology, meeting places for storytelling and building memories, for opportunities to learn how to respect themselves and each other, for knowing and taking care of neighbors, for neighborhood celebrations, baseball games, learning centers and social clubs, for rules and regulations to ensure justice for all, and a place to talk with God -- we need to build a sense of community which is necessary if an inhabitant is to experience any place as home.

A sense of community is necessary to experience any place as home. Before you have a real home, you must have a community in which to situate it and to find it.

The Christian way of living is communitarian. Early Christians were so connected to one another that St. Paul called each community a "body of Christ."⁵

The LORD God then took the man and settled him in the Garden of Eden, to cultivate and care for it.

-- Genesis 2:15

⁵ *Eight Good Reasons for Being Catholic* by Richard Rohr, O.F.M., and Joseph Martos