



Winter Sanctuary: Testimony from Volunteers

Below are testimonies from volunteers at [St. Mark's United Methodist Church](#), one of the 24 congregations that hosted homeless folks this winter. Over 2,000 total volunteers from the participating interfaith congregations lent a helping hand this winter.

Follow our Winter Sanctuary news and progress at our website [here](#).

St. Mark's United Methodist Church took its second turn hosting and feeding homeless guests in MacMurdo Hall. This time we had between 70 and 96 individuals each night from Sunday, February 27th, through Friday morning, March 4th.

The members and the friends of the church donated an amazing amount of food, socks, and other items to make this happen. More than 250 pairs of socks were distributed. We needed 42 dozen eggs and received over 80 dozen. We needed 30 pounds of spaghetti but took in 45 pounds. Roughly 200 gallons of milk and juice were required but close to 280 gallons came into the church. The surplus food is being used to help feed the Family Promise guests and to restock our own Food Closet (which is open were Tuesday and Thursday from 1:00 to 3:00 PM).

Over eighty people volunteered during the week to greet guests, prepare and serve meals, wash feet, play games, work on craft projects, distribute reading materials, and most importantly to provide a "ministry of presence". Many of the volunteers had only signed up for one night, but were so moved as to return for additional nights. The guests were visited with and listened to as children of God, as our brothers and sisters in Christ.

I have asked some of the volunteers to share their stories and experiences. Here are a few:

(It is) easy for some of us to talk about the Gospel, but for some of our homeless friends they are actually clinging to it for dear life.

~Faith

There is one thing that stood out for me though. Through conversation with a few of our guests I discovered that we had a few young adults with us that had recently returned from serving our country over seas. This breaks my heart. I feel honored and blessed to have washed the feet of a few of our military veterans both old and young. I also feel blessed to finally belong to a church family that LOVES unconditionally.

~Blythe

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I met Richard soon after people started arriving on Sunday. He was, in his words as well as mine, a really sweet guy. A lot of the homeless were tired and laying out their sleeping bags, and some seemed uninterested in making small talk with a total stranger from yet another church (and I admit, were I in that situation, I'd probably feel the same way). But many were willing to converse, Richard most of all.

We played Uno and cards and talked about nothing in particular the first night. I made several assurances that I would return before the week was up, and Richard was right there with the Uno deck when I arrived again on Wednesday. He told me about his past, about how he had been to prison years ago, and had worked countless low-paying jobs since. I remember thinking just how hard it must be to have a felony on your record, and utterly unable to find someone willing to hire you for more than minimum wage. He had family in Modesto, but didn't want to be a burden on them, and had come to Sacramento looking for work. But he didn't want pity or sympathy, just someone to ease the loneliness for a while. I couldn't relate to a lot of his experiences, but I could relate to that.

Not all of the homeless are hungry for food – some are hungry for friendship, for someone to care, for a short while anyway. It's so much harder to just spend time with someone you don't know very well, who comes from a very different background, than it is to just write a check, but it's also that much more rewarding. I feel blessed to have met Richard, and the many others at the shelter who shared their stories with me. I told him if I ever saw him walking around downtown (where I live) that I would say hi, though I don't think he believed me. But even if I never see him again, I'll keep him in my prayers.

~Kelsey

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I was especially struck by one young man. I don't remember his name, but he was in his early 20's and was very respectful and well-spoken. He expressed his gratitude for the socks and a small bottle of shampoo. He told me that he had been homeless for 3 weeks and had been unable to wash his hair during that time.

I take a lot of everyday comforts for granted, including my home, my daily hot shower and a comfortable bed to sleep in. Seeing the plight of the most vulnerable people in our city tugs at my heart. Thank God that I am a member of a warm inclusionary church that does Jesus' work.

~Cathy

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I was introduced mid-week to Russell Venner and Al Stevens. Russ is a sound technician who was working for a Florida company. The firm had abruptly closed its doors while he was part of a crew they had sent to California. Unlike the others he had no means of getting back. Al had been a retired contractor with four state licenses. When the economy tanked Al's investments were soon wiped out, his home foreclosed on, and he had been unsuccessful in finding work.

Both had been on the streets for less than three weeks, and as Al said, they had "no clue of how to be homeless." Others in the shelter program had been showing them the ropes of where to go for various services and how to apply for aid. Al still had a "deer in caught in the headlights look" to him the night we met.

We I saw them again on Thursday night they were quick to share some great news. Russ had been offered a gig in Texas and he would be leaving for there on Saturday taking Al and two other guys they meet in the shelter program with them. Not permanent jobs, but off the streets and working for a while.

~Kevin

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I realized by talking to the interesting man sitting next to me how easy it is to become homeless. He got a DUI, was put in jail for several months, and his daughter and girlfriend could not keep up the rent on their apartment without his contribution, so they all lost their home. However, he was an assistant manager at Home Town Buffet, previously, and he called checking out job opportunities and on Friday was going to find out about a job. I hope this happens. What a fascinating person and very kind.

~Inga

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As many of us may say: This experience was, I feel, perhaps more beneficial, more rewarding for me than for the people we served. Their stories are so diverse, as are their backgrounds; they are truly interesting and worthy people, many in situations not of their own design.

~Joann

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Everyone is lined up waiting to be served their evening meal; I hear “hi Ruth” from a man I had met and listened to from the previous evening. Then all of a sudden I heard — “Grandma” — one of the men is looking straight at me, so it had to be me and it was. He came out of line to tell me his Grandma’s name was Ruth and he misses her. This led to sitting together at a table while he ate and I listened to much of his journey. As we went from the places we lived, to our common geographical locations and experiences in those locations, our conversation went to deeper places as he revealed his journey into homelessness. Having worked in the field of Alcohol and Drugs, I have heard similar stories before but not spoken with such humility and commitment. However, this man was very open and pleased with his recovery, as he says, today I’m clean and sober (one day at a time).

~Ruth

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Our guests, in outward appearance, were a motley crew – mostly men – bundled up in old outside clothing, carrying bundles with sleeping bags and a few possessions – grizzled, unshaven, often haggard, some toothless – typical of our general image of homeless people. There were no big surprises during the evenings except that I did not expect the ones I encountered to be so talkative, so bright, so humorous, so friendly, so different in their personalities and backgrounds. At least some of them had a noticeable spark of hope and pride coming from varied life experiences.

I had a long chat with four guests – two each night. Within that group of four, I was talking with an IT technician, an elevator mechanic, a carpenter, a waiter at the Ahwahnee Hotel in Yosemite National Park, a bar tender, a father of 21 children – all his own (one a surgeon), a grandfather who showed me sweet photos of his young grandson and granddaughter, a man who was taking a math course and doing

homework with mixed numbers with fractions (being an engineer, I coached him), a former resident of Minnesota who had fished in Owatonna where four generations of my father's family lived, a young man, 25 years old, homeless for just three weeks who had never been east of Utah but wondered how Maine would be to live, a man who was partly toothless who had a scrap of paper telling of a source of free dentistry, a man who quoted FDR, a man who read Stephen King novels and one who read the newspaper in the library. We had good two-way conversations...

These were full-fledged members of the human race with an ample supply of life experience including some who had struggled with addictions and other of life's pitfalls. It was not easy for me to confront the homeless aspect of our guests. I cannot imagine myself being able to survive if I suddenly became homeless...

Let us hope our entire community around Sacramento can tap into their inner wells of compassion and support more and better programs that care for the homeless, and counsel those who are able to merge back into regular society. That would be a great day!

~Roger

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I spent two evenings at St. Marks with the guests and was amazed at how gracious and thankful they were. I enjoyed visiting with a young man, Rico, with big dreams and a very sweet personality. He was from Salinas and said that his family knew where he was and the situation he was in. As a mom it broke my heart.

Then there was a lady who had no teeth and it would have been so easy to think of her as someone of very low intelligence. She had been a dealer at a casino and was very proud that she had completed one year of college. She was playing cards and was very fast and sharp with her math.

Then James, playing the piano. One of the other male guests said that he had had the most tranquil evening ever, just laying on his sleeping bag listening to the beautiful music.

It was a blessing being involved.

~Rosalie

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The media constantly bombards us with statistics of the millions of persons in pain and hurting and we have a tendency to throw up our hands and say we can do nothing to make things better. But we had an opportunity in the two periods hosting Winter Shelter to affect the lives of a few people in a profound way, and in the process, just maybe bringing ourselves a little closer to God.

~ John

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Since the first time that St. Mark's hosted the Winter Sanctuary Program, it has changed my life. I never would have thought that 100's of homeless people could make such a profound impact on my heart. So many times, we have pre-conceived ideas of what a 'homeless' person is about. My time with these guests has changed my ideas and my heart forever...The common thread that I found in talking with

many of these guests were: gratitude, appreciation, genuine love, hope and faith. If only we could all embrace those concepts and be half as humble as they were – the world would be a much nicer place.

~Paula