

St. Vincent De Paul Church

On the Question of the Homeless Residents of Our Park

On March 18th, 2007, in the Lenten season, over sixty parishioners attended a town meeting at St. Vincent de Paul Church. We gathered to discuss homelessness and the homeless persons who live in our park.

The Meeting

Colleen McCahill, our Parish Council president, facilitated the meeting. In addition, a group of parishioners assisted with planning and running the meeting and taking notes. There were six panelists at the meeting, including our Pastor, Fr. Richard Lawrence;

- Madeleine Shea, Assistant Commissioner for Healthy Homes for the Health Department of the City of Baltimore.
- Officer Sharon Talley, a Baltimore City police officer with special training in social work. She serves as a liaison between the police department, the city government, and Fr. Lawrence.
- Deacon Bill Pearson, called by his ordination to care for the poor. He works with the homeless dinner program run by St. Mary of the Fields Parish and housed in our undercroft.
- Jack Bonner, a psychiatric nurse who works with addicted patients at the Johns Hopkins Outpatient HIV/AIDS clinic.
- Betty Kavanagh, the Director of Psychosocial Services at Health Care for the Homeless.

Attendees asked questions of the panelists and provided comments and opinions. All attendees were asked to write questions and comments on cards, which were collected. Some of the issues from the cards were addressed at the meeting, some were not. At the conclusion of the meeting, we were also asked to provide written comments on the value and structure of the gathering. After the meeting, we gathered for dinner in the undercroft.

A Summary

The discourse was civil, thoughtful, and searching. Since this was the first opportunity for parishioners to speak in an open forum on this topic, we understood that the goals of the assembly were to ask important questions, to challenge assumptions, and to share concerns.

Together we answered some of our questions. We heard from Officer Talley that there are about twelve actual residents of the park. Other homeless persons gather and disperse according to the time of day and other factors. We heard that many homeless people (many more than live there) in Baltimore City receive access to services by virtue of the centrality and visibility of this park. We heard about Baltimore City's ten-year plan to significantly reduce homelessness, and about the endemic problem of poverty as a root cause of homelessness.

Together we brought up our concerns. The park is regarded by some service providers and other churches as a centrally located place to bring clothing and food. For some, ministry to homeless people is essential to living the gospel. This creates an opportunity for many homeless people to congregate. However, these functions contribute to traffic and garbage. Areas of the park are quite unsanitary. Some parishioners are concerned about personal safety. Several parishioners have had car windows broken. Hypodermic needles have been found on the ground around the church. Some people are concerned that the appearance of the park is serving as a deterrent to potential new parishioners.

There was no clear consensus at this gathering regarding how to respond to the particular challenges incurred by having homeless persons live in the park. There was, however, an indication that our parish needs to further examine our intentions regarding those residents.

The Considerations

All of the written questions and statements from the meeting were collected. We identified areas of interest, and made note of frequently asked questions as indicating greater interest. The questions and concerns raised, both aloud at the meeting, and in writing, were broad-based.

Commonly asked questions were versions of the following.

- What is St. Vincent's mission or plan regarding the homeless persons who live in our park?
- What services are available to the homeless in Baltimore?
- What can I do?
- Having homeless persons living in the park at all times creates safety/health/cleanliness issues for current and potential parishioners. What can be done about this?

Since the Town Meeting, St. Vincent's Parish Council has looked at all of the questions raised by parishioners. We particularly tried to address parishioners' concern for a plan of action or indication of direction. We recognized the following:

- Pursuing any one direction will not completely remove controversy within the parish
- The questions are complex. Homelessness in Baltimore, as elsewhere, is a symptom of the endemic problems of poverty, lack of access to health care, and lack of affordable housing.
- The interests, desires, hopes and fears of our parishioners are diverse and heartfelt.

Parish Council discerned parishioner support for four possible actions that our parish might take on this issue. These possible actions are:

1. Close the park. Close the park to homeless residents. No one will be allowed to take up residence or sleep overnight in the park.

Obstacles to this action:

- This will be very divisive within the parish.
- It will be more difficult for many homeless people, including non-residents of the park, to receive services.
- Enforcement will require monitoring and time investment by the Pastor and/or others from the church, to assist the police.
- This will alter the character of the parish.

2. Obtain housing for the current residents of the park and then close it to homeless residents.

Obstacles to this action:

- As those in Action 1, and:
- Successfully securing housing for current residents will take an unknown amount of time, during which it will be difficult to prevent other homeless persons from moving into the park.

3. Consider the park a transitory to semi-permanent living space for homeless people. Allow homeless persons to live in the park and receive services from city and other agencies (i.e., other churches, non-profit organizations, Health Care for the Homeless, Baltimore Homeless Services, etc.). Provide no specific services by the parish of St. Vincent de Paul Church. Allow residents of the park to come to masses and to the coffee hour after the 9:30 mass. Forbid residents of the park from sleeping or loitering on the steps of the church or anywhere inside the iron fence that surrounds the church building and parking lot. Fr. Dick will continue to liaise with Officer Sharon Talley of the

Baltimore City Police Department with regards to health and safety concerns, both for the residents of the park and St. Vincent's parishioners.

Obstacles to this action:

- This is approximately what we do now. Some parishioners feel it is the best option for an extremely complicated circumstance. Others are interested in Actions 1, 2, and 4.

4. Consider the park a transitory living space for homeless people, with access to services and an active ministry of the parish of St. Vincent de Paul Church. As in action item 3, except with the addition of the following: a cohort of parishioners will assist in caring for the needs of park residents and/or working towards a more tolerable association between park residents and parishioners. This group will report and make recommendations to Parish Council, will suggest ground rules for residents of the park, and will create other expectations or standards for an active relationship between the residents of the park and the parishioners of St. Vincent de Paul Church. Parishioners give two reasons for this kind of action. One is the maintenance of a more attractive church property. The other is the building up of the quality of life for the park residents.

Obstacles to this action:

- This action requires a significant investment of time and energy by parishioners.
- Working with the homeless, many of whom are mentally ill and/or addicted, is challenging work even for those trained to do it. Parishioners may not be equipped to take on these tasks.

Parish Council Response

We acknowledge the continuum of community feelings on this matter. The Parish Council agrees that our best course of action is Option 4, with the understanding that our parish could accomplish these goals within the limitations of interested parishioners. As a Catholic church, with the call to be a community which includes the poor, disaffected and exiled as an explicit part of our mission statement, we recognize that telling the homeless to "move along" will not solve a larger problem. We recognize also the responsibility to care for the spiritual, emotional, personal security, and aesthetic needs of our regular, churchgoing parish community.

A Plan

The Parish Council wholeheartedly supports parishioners who are ready and willing to create a more active ministry as a part of the mission of our church. These parishioners ought to form an advocacy group, which would have the needs of both the homeless and the parish in view.

Possible goals for this group to address follow:

- Giving parishioners who want to make a suggestion or complaint, or who want to help in some way, recourse to a parish group which would report to the Parish Council.
- Making the park a cleaner, healthier, more humane and more attractive place.
- Facilitating direct and ongoing contact between this advocacy group and the appropriate offices in city and state government in an effort to improve the plight of the homeless.
- Sponsoring and organizing a public forum on the problem of homelessness.
- Educating the parishioners of St. Vincent's about the history of the park, its residents, and developments or changes through regular reports.
- Helping the park to be only a transitory place for anyone to stay: assisting the homeless persons living in the park in receiving access to housing and treatment programs.
- Helping to keep the park reasonably free of trash so that residents, parishioners, visitors and guests, tourists, and potential parishioners will not be distressed at the sight of it.
- Reporting illegal activity in the park.

