

***Why are there people living in squalor on the very doorstep of historic St. Vincent de Paul Church?***

There are homeless people living throughout Baltimore City year around, sleeping at night in whatever shelter they can find or make. Probably the most visible, largest, and least transitory encampment of homeless is in St. Vincent de Paul Park. The homeless persons who live in the park are there because it is one of the few places in the city that they can be sure they will not be driven off or scattered. It has been policy at this church for many years that no person shall be denied the right to sleep in the park. At the same time, no social service agencies have been denied access to the park or the residents. Until very recently, one of the largest challenges to the problem of homelessness in Baltimore City was the lack of available housing and medical/mental health treatment for these people with very few resources. However, changes in city administration and a national trend towards attention to the issue of homelessness may begin to address the problem more effectively.

***Isn't St. Vincent's really using the park and its residents as leverage to get the appropriate city agencies to do something about homelessness?***

If this were the only reason for the park to be as it is, there would be a distortion of Christian justice. There is no question, however, that having the homeless people encamped there, in the public eye, serves as a powerful and prophetic reminder that we are not providing for the neediest among us.

***Does St. Vincent de Paul Church have a goal for the park?***

The Parish Council states that the best course of action for our parish is to consider the park a transitory living space for homeless people, with access to services and an active ministry of St. Vincent de Paul Church. Therefore, the goal for the parish is: a) to assist any homeless person living in the park into safe housing and such treatment programs and/or medical assistance as is needed, and b) so long as there is a homeless person in Baltimore City sleeping on the streets, to make that person welcome to sleep in St. Vincent de Paul Church Park.

***Is this the best that we can do?***

Probably not. Parishioners were invited to form an advocacy group around this concern. Though many have shown an interest, none has been inclined to lead this effort. The church employs only two people full-time. The congregation is small and almost no parishioners actually live within parish boundaries. Parishioners have not known how to begin. Some feel overburdened at the prospect of engaging in a new ministry. Some are concerned that they do not have the skill-set necessary for a ministry to potentially addicted and/or mentally ill people. As of this writing, however, there is hope that some new initiatives and a promise of time and attention to the issue by a small group of parishioners may lead to some change for the better.

***Why can't we create and enforce some rules for park residents?***

Perhaps we can. This will require either a change in how we budget our resources, so that we can hire someone to do this job, or a commitment of time by a group of parishioners; possibly both of these. We choose to be parishioners here for many reasons: will one of those reasons be because it is a place where we must live out our Christian witness to the exiled and marginalized? From our website: "St. Vincent's is a part of Jonestown, Baltimore's oldest neighborhood. Most of us do not live here...but we all realize that choosing this church means accepting responsibility for its neighborhood, in which we participate in a number of ways."

***Are there parishioners who will not speak out on this issue because they are afraid of being labeled Un-Christian or Uncharitable?***

Being distressed and discouraged at the tragedy and dirt of a life lived on the street is not uncharitable. Neither is it un-Christian to be frustrated and angered by our inability, both individually and collectively, to enact swift, positive change. Many parishioners have spoken out and/or written about their feelings: to each other, at Town Meetings, to their Parish Council reps, and to the Pastor.

***Parishioners are referred to the following:***

The letter "St. Vincent de Paul Church: On the Question of the Homeless Residents of Our Park," which is available on our website at [www.stvchurch.org](http://www.stvchurch.org), gives some perspective on this parish's process of discernment on this issue.

The 2007 Baltimore City Homeless Census helps to explain the causes of homelessness:  
[http://www.baltimorehealth.org/info/2007%20BaltimoreCityHomelessCensus\\_9\\_14\\_07.pdf](http://www.baltimorehealth.org/info/2007%20BaltimoreCityHomelessCensus_9_14_07.pdf)

"The Journey Home: Baltimore's Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness," details the scope of needs and the strategic planning necessary for any significant reduction in homelessness:  
<http://www.ci.baltimore.md.us/mayor/downloads/0108%2010%20Year%20Plan.pdf>

The National Alliance to End Homelessness has a comprehensive website. See "What You Can Do."  
<http://www.endhomelessness.org/section/action/actnow>