Companionship on Seattle streets
From transaction to mutuality in ministry

Jonathan and Melanie Neufeld

When Seattle Mennonite Church decided in the early 1990s to purchase and renovate a mothballed movie theater as its home for worship and congregational life, the group made the decision largely on practical grounds related to the affordability of the building and access to parking. What God put before the congregation as a result of our move into the commercial hub of the Lake City neighborhood we could not have anticipated.

Seattle Mennonite Church and neighborhood people experiencing homelessness were sharing the same space, and the congregation needed to wrestle with questions of what and how much they were called to offer in response.

It is natural that when people experience homelessness and other kinds of suffering resulting from poverty, they seek help wherever they can get it. Seattle Mennonite Church is the congregation located closest to the heart of our neighborhood, so people in need come to our building. Young adults in the congregation recall times when as children they would arrive for Sunday morning worship and would have to step around people sleeping outside the doors who had sought sanctuary in the courtyard of the church building.

The church and the community of people experiencing homelessness were sharing the same space, and the congregation needed to wrestle with questions of what and how much they were called by God to offer in response. People in traumatic crisis who attended church on Sunday morning had a significant impact on the congregation's worship life, and staff working in the building during the week were overwhelmed by the emergencies that cropped up daily to consume seemingly endless amounts of energy and time.

Offering companionship

Not wanting to control the planning process, not wanting to act out of an assumption that the congregation knew what our neighbors who were experiencing homelessness needed, we began to invite people in the community to join us for a shared meal every month. These monthly meals became the context for our learning how to offer companionship.

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The meals were characterized by careful listening, in the belief that the one who is experiencing suffering of whatever kind has an inner awareness of what she longs for and what her hopes are for her future. Yes, this inner awareness can be shrouded by experiences of trauma, poverty, abuse, and addiction, but these deep intentions and identity remain. This inner sense of self is God's gift to every person, and it roots in every person a sense of worth, identity, and purpose in life. The intention of companionship is to listen for and coax out this inner awareness which coexists with and is enmeshed in the experience of suffering.

Avoiding transactional ministry

One outcome of this companionship and deep listening was an effort to avoid familiar patterns of transactional ministry, in which one group is seen to have superior knowledge, excess wealth, and surplus resources needed by another group, which simply need to be given or transferred to the people in need. This model of ministry has been likened to what happens in clonal colonies of Aspen trees. Aspen colonies are forests of thousands of trees, covering many hectares of land, all derived from one seedling and connected by one root system. This forest of trees can deliver nutrients through its roots from locations of abundance to the places where they are needed. This kind of redistribution of economic resources has a definite place in the mission of the church, especially in response to emergencies including natural and other disasters. This model is relevant for the church and society as we respond to inequity on a personal, systemic, local, and global scale.

But if relationships are based solely on a model of transaction in which people with relative privilege give resources to people in poverty (of whatever kind), the result can be even greater imbalance and inequity. In such places of imbalance, resentment can enter relationships, as people in communities of relative privilege feel that all they are being asked to do is give, give, and give again, while the resilience, giftedness, and talents of people on the receiving end of redistribution are undermined and left to languish, hidden from view.

Seeking to avoid this familiar scenario that transactional ministry can create, and attempting to set ourselves on a path toward shared experience, mutuality, and collaborative ministry, Seattle Mennonite began with fellowship, with human-to-human connection. These times of fellowship were the setting for asking questions: What is the experience of homelessness like in our neighborhood? What resources can we all contribute to our response, in ways that are person-centered, trauma-informed, and recovery-oriented?

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Stop, drop, and roll

Our neighbors experiencing homelessness expressed a desire to make it to medical appointments, follow through on housing opportunities, and look for work. But carrying all your belongings on your back inhibits your ability to pursue your goals. And large backpacks not only create chronic pain and physical impairment, they also put your experience of homelessness on display and so subject you to stigma, fear, and exclusion by the broader community. The alternative to carrying your bag on your back is to stash it in a bush or behind a dumpster and thus run the risk of losing everything to theft or the "litter patrol."

Seattle Mennonite Church has a building, and it could be used to store people's belongings. *Stop, Drop and Roll* was born as a result of conversation with these neighbors. It is a safe storage program: people can *stop* by first thing in the morning, *drop* off their things, and use the restrooms to freshen up and then *roll* out into the day in search of work or to get to their appointments—

without fear of losing what little they had, and without the stigma and the physical strain of carrying all their belongings on their backs. In the evening the church opens again to allow people to claim their belongings and share a meal.

Kitchen access

Also emerging from the companionship of fellowship was a second kind of collaboration. People experiencing homelessness in the congregation's neighborhood did not lack access to food but did need a place to prepare it. Food stamp programs and food banks had plenty to offer, but much of it was unappetizing when eaten cold or raw. Most churches have kitchens, and Seattle Mennonite's became the community kitchen for Stop, Drop, and Roll.

People could be overheard discussing menu options, each one offering to collect a needed ingredient. The evening hours would see the arrival of people and ingredients, and in short order a shared meal would emerge from their contributions and preparations. These were truly times when one could witness how the pooling of resources had a multiplying effect in the experience of the group. Yes, the congregation has resources to contribute to the response to homelessness, but those resources are shared as one part of a larger whole. That dynamic invites everyone to contribute what they can for the benefit of the group.

What could be more valuable than creating space in which people—even as they live with homelessness, mental illness, addiction, or other chronic conditions—can share their gifts and talents? One sometimes hears a Christian declare that he won't help someone who struggles with addictions, because he doesn't want to enable self-destructive behaviours. Perhaps that is an effort at self-justification, an excuse for doing nothing to help. Enabling need not be seen as a bad thing; it can also be needed encouragement, placing opportunities in front of people that can become occasions for making healthier choices and reducing harm. Instead of withholding opportunities until people have proven themselves to be deserving or worthy, we hope to participate in creating settings in which people can pursue recovery.

God's Li'l Acre

Now, more than seven years since the inception of Stop, Drop,

and Roll as a weekly affair, these familiar rhythms recur Monday through Friday at our day center. The center has been named by community members; they call it God's Li'l Acre. It is a place of predictability, safety, and sanctuary in the midst of a sometimes hostile world—which could only be of God.

An early spokesman from the community likened the day center to an watering hole in the savannas of Africa, a place where a variety of animals come, rest, drink, and do not consume one another. This same man, so incredibly invested in our shared discernment and so gracious in calling our congregation into relationship, clearly identified our task as a congregation in and with community. He would often pray, "May the prick of compassion be the hammer that helps us drive our nails straight."

We still get calls from congregations who hear about what we are doing and want to help by making sandwiches for people experiencing homelessness. We have to explain yet again that we don't provide food for our neighbors, just a place for them to feed themselves and one another. What we could use though, we tell them, is your time, your presence, your encouragement, your love, and your openness to being loved by someone whose life experience may be very different from your own. Our intention is to point away from the familiar experience of transactional ministry toward the abundance that can be experienced in community.

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One definition of homelessness is the experience of being totally and completely alone: of knowing that at the end of the day that there is no one alongside you, no one to share life with you, no one to encourage you, no one there but you. No one thrives in complete isolation. Our long-term intention in focusing on companionship and fellowship is to be part of creating experiences of community. It all begins with one-on-one, human-to-human connections. It doesn't come about when the person of relative privilege seeks to save or change the person who is suffering. Instead there must be a deep listening for the words, the dreams, the hopes that are already within the individual.

When a person is ready to move toward a future she dreams of and hopes for, what she may need most is a companion, someone to walk alongside her as she steps onto a new old path. It is a path that will lead to other people, in churches, in agencies, and in care centers. Through such companionship we participate in opening up the possibility of rebuilding the true wealth of a society for one who is suffering. It is the wealth of community, a web of caring, a cloud of witnesses, a holy nation, a people belonging to God. Such a community welcomes every person and depends on the wealth that emerges when each of us brings the gifts God has given us, for the blessing and growth of the whole.

Note

For a deeper exploration of companionship and community building, read *Souls in the Hand of a Tender God: Stories of the Search for Home and Healing on the Streets*, by Craig Rennebohm and David W. Paul (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008); and *Beyond Homelessness: Christian Faith in a Culture of Displacement*, by Steven Bouma-Prediger and Brian J. Walsh (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

About the authors

Jonathan and Melanie Neufeld have served Seattle Mennonite Church as community ministers since 2007. They are blessed to be able to encourage and be witnesses to the incredible transformation that can occur when a neighborhood comes together to work to end the experience of homelessness.