



KNOWING & DOING

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Urban Plunge Reflections: *What about the Poor in Our Own Backyard*

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God Lays a Foundation for Serving the Poor

During the summer of 2009, my wife and I accompanied some two hundred high school students and chaperones on an annual McLean Bible Church mission trip to the Dominican Republic.

One day I worked with a construction team making small repairs and improvements at an orphanage. After completing that project, we were taken unexpectedly to the community of Quisqueya to perform a surprise “make-over” of a two-bedroom apartment, the home of a local Dominican school teacher, Mirqueya Guzman, which she had transformed into a day-care center that served more than fifty children. Mirqueya had opened her doors eight years earlier, moved by the needs of the impoverished children of broken homes—with parents beholden to drugs or prostitution or voodoo. When children were not in school, she welcomed them.

We spent the day repainting walls, replacing aged kitchen appliances and cabinets, repairing lights and electrical wiring. We provided shoes, school supplies, and snacks for the children. When a surprised Mirqueya returned from her outing, she fell on her knees and wept. I will never forget her parting words of gratitude: “What a great God we serve that you would fly across an ocean to help people you do not know to benefit children you will never see again.”

Similar Needs in My Own Backyard

My experiences in the Dominican Republic remind me of the gratification that can come from serving the poor in the developing world. But my readings and reflections in the C.S. Lewis Institute Fellows Program have led me to see that there are materially and spiritually needy people in my own community who need a helping hand as well.

This was driven home to me during the morning of my Urban Plunge experience. The Center for Student Missions (CSM) team with which the C.S. Lewis Institute partnered sent my Fellows team out in the morning to the Anacostia neighborhood of Washington, DC, to volunteer at the Children of Mine Youth Center.

We were greeted by the director, Hannah Hawkins, whose young husband was murdered in 1970, leaving her with five children to raise. Rather than surrendering to grief and rage, she promised God that if He would give her the strength to survive this challenge, she would serve those less fortunate than herself. More than ten years later, she founded the Children of Mine Youth Center in her home. There, like Mirqueya Guzman in the Caribbean, Mrs. Hawkins invested her own money to provide hot meals, clothing, tutoring, and other assistance for children in her neighborhood.

Mrs. Hawkins and Children of Mine are still going strong. Many of the students are latch-key children. Many live with caretakers debilitated by chronic substance abuse or who are overwhelmed by the need to raise children on an income that cannot provide adequate shelter, food, and clothing. These children often fend for themselves.

Mrs. Hawkins had a vision to prevent these at-risk children from becoming children in crisis: in faith, providing love, security, education, and effective communication.

Here within ten miles of my suburban home in Arlington, Virginia, was a day-care center extending services similar to those offered by Mirqueya Guzman 1,470 miles away in the Dominican Republic. This experience challenged my romanticized notion of overseas missions, one that had given me license to compartmentalize any call to “serve the poor” to those who may live beyond our country’s borders. This is consistent with the need for local service suggested by my Fellows mentor and commanded by Christ—to love my neighbor without regard to the proximity of my neighbor.

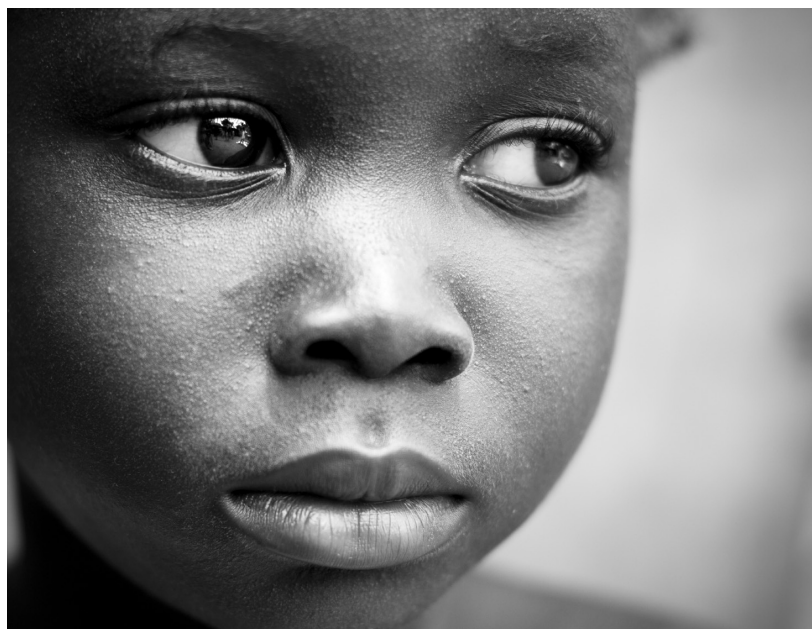
Homeless by Choice—but Does It Matter?

As another aspect of our Urban Plunge, my team of six was assigned by our CSM hosts to go to the park at Franklin Square in downtown DC to engage with homeless people over lunch. Each of us had been given six dollars by our CSM hosts: four dollars for transportation (round-trip bus fare), and two dollars to pool to provide lunch for ourselves and one or more homeless person(s).

We were encouraged to be creative in how we obtained lunch for seven or more for only twelve dollars. We were creative by *walking* the two miles to Franklin Square. This saved us two dollars each and doubled our available lunch funds. Before setting out, we debated the moral implications of diverting our travel money. Was this cheating, skirting the challenge of finding a meal with only two dollars each?

In the end, majority opinion prevailed and we walked, also influenced by the beautiful weather. (Our consciences were salved when we later learned that homeless people walk practically everywhere, especially in good weather; money being scarcer than time for them.)

At Franklin Square two of us headed to a nearby Domino’s Pizza to see how much lunch they could get for twenty-four dollars. The remaining four of us split into pairs to wander through the park and identify a likely homeless person or two with whom we might have lunch and try to engage in a civil, informative conversation. Picking out a promising luncheon partner was not easy for me, in no small measure because of the gulf between my experience and that of those on the park benches. Many looked as if the last thing on their mind was a conversation with anyone. Some were asleep. Others were already eating soup or other food being distributed by churches or other charities. The ground was strewn with whole and half-eaten peanut butter and jelly sandwiches in sandwich bags—evidence that the culinary options that noon were broad and deep, and that cold PBJ sandwiches did not make the grade.



My teammate and I approached two thirty-something males sitting on a bench who made eye contact with us. Starting a conversation, we found them to be friendly, engaging, and articulate. They both claimed to be “homeless by choice.” Having lost a job and become disillusioned with the “rat race” of daily life at home in Pennsylvania, they each, separately, decided to try life on the streets.

Both had moved to Washington after researching which urban areas offered the most generous public and charitable support for the homeless. Washington won. They met each other at a homeless shelter, and both recognized that the other was “polite,” not angry or

paranoid, as apparently many of the homeless are. They struck up a friendship and often hang out together and watch each other's backs.

By God's grace we had been led to two apparently sane, thoughtful homeless people with whom we could have lunch and explore a list of questions suggested by CSM. I must admit that I felt a little guilty. This was too easy. In retrospect, I like to believe that God led us to these two "Gentlemen of Franklin Park" (GFP).

As our teammates returned with several Domino's pizzas to share with our guests, we dove into conversation with the GFP. In the course of our conversation, here are several of the things we learned:

There Is Plenty of Food for the Homeless. "The pizza you brought is attractive to folks here because it is warm food. Although today, being a Saturday and late afternoon (about 2:00 pm), most folks are already satiated. Many go to local shelters for a free meal. Many avail themselves of the charity of food offered here in the park. Lots of Christian groups come through the park distributing food, especially on the weekends.

"I appreciate the pizza, but am really not hungry. If you really want to provide a service, bring hot food during the week. We went to the shelter and got food elsewhere for lunch, including a large sandwich, soup, several apples, cookies, granola bars. I am stuffed (while holding out the pizza box to offer slices to other, obviously less coherent, homeless folks ambling over). Also, the food is more appreciated at the end of the month, after folks have run through whatever government benefits they may have received for the month" (e.g., Social Security, Food Stamps).

People Are Generally Charitable: "I am always impressed and reassured by how caring and generous most people are. On those occasions when I have no money and am really hungry, I will go stand outside the nearby Domino's (or whatever sounds good to eat) at lunchtime. I tell entering patrons that I am hungry and ask them if they would be so kind as to get me something to eat. It generally does not take more than thirty minutes until someone buys me a meal. Sometimes they just hand me a pizza on the way out. Even better, often they ask beforehand what I would like, and buy me whatever I ask for."



Only Sleep Outside: The GFP only sleep out of doors. "We learned early not to sleep in the shelters. One will likely get lice or bed bugs or something there. We sleep in parks mostly. People generally leave us alone. Once in a while—rarely—police will wake you up and ask you to move along. The worst I have ever been treated was when I slept on the steps of a church. In the early morning they brusquely kicked me and insisted that I get out of their doorway. A little ironic and disappointing."

What Happens in Winter?: When we asked how they fare in the winter, the GFP said that they were relative newcomers to homelessness, having begun in the summer of 2013. As we visited with them on a pleasant weekend in early November, they did not know what winter might bring. They suggested that we come find them in February and ask. (Embarrassingly, I admit that I have not done so.)

Homeless by Choice: "We are homeless by choice. But then really almost everyone you see here is homeless by choice. Surely, some of them made the decision to live on the street while their decision making was impaired by alcohol or drugs or mental illness. But there are plenty of shelters and places to live if one does not want to live on the street."

The Homeless Are Connected Electronically and Financially: "Almost everyone you see here has an e-mail account (e.g., through Gmail). They access their accounts at the public library, which provides very good Internet access through an impressive array of publicly available computers. Those with friends, families, and the desire to stay connected do so through e-mail, Facebook, etc. The homeless also have bank accounts into which any government benefits can be directly deposited. Many have SNAP (Food Stamp) electronic benefit transfer (EBT) cards onto which their benefits are automatically uploaded at the first of each month." Apparently there are outlets that illegally redeem the funds on the cards, returning 50 to 85 cents on the dollar (cash) to the card holders.

For Inquiring Minds There Is Plenty to Do: The GFP spend much of their days at the public library, where the staff knows them and accommodates their needs. They both claimed to be Christians. One of them had read through long lists of philosophical and religious writings (including Eastern religions) and was plowing his way through the classics and “great books.” The GFP were well informed regarding the news and political events of the day. Interestingly, one expressed strong opinions about the federal government wasting resources on military and low-priority spending, instead of providing more for human needs.

Holding Lightly to Possessions: The physical limitations presented by physically carrying all of one’s possessions, frequent theft, and the lack of laundry service have taught the GFP to hold lightly to their worldly possessions.

One of them commented that this is a spiritual virtue that was being strengthened by their homeless experience. It does not mean that they *enjoy* having their hat stolen while they sleep or having to exchange their dirty clothing for clean, “new” second-hand clothes. But they have learned by experience not to invest too much emotional energy in tightly holding their possessions.

Laundry Service Is Lacking: When we asked what services were most lacking for the homeless, the GFP agreed: available affordable laundry service. Generally the homeless have access to clothing through charitable donations. Because the homeless have nowhere to store their clothing and other possessions, they are limited to owning whatever they can carry on their backs (or, for some, in a shopping cart). With limited access to laundry services but relatively free access to clothing donations, this means that it is often easier to discard dirty clothing in exchange for “new” clothing than to clean the clothes they already own. The GFP seemed philosophical about this predicament, although a little wistful about having to part with clothes they really liked only because they were dirty. The GFP told us of at least one charity that provides laundry service, but it is a drop in the ocean compared to the need. If one were interested in providing a needed service for the homeless in DC, laundry service would be one avenue to explore.



Practical Tips for Helping the Homeless

In addition to providing hot meals or laundry service, here are a few practical tips suggested by the GFP:

Instead of giving out bags filled with toiletries, offer the opportunity to choose from an array of necessities. When well-meaning people (like C.S. Lewis Institute Fellows) hand out bags filled with various toiletries, the homeless will often keep the few items that meet their immediate need and throw the rest away. This behavior is driven in part by their limited ability to carry inventory with them and in part by the resources already in their backpacks or easily obtainable at local shelters or charities. And toiletries like shampoo are relatively heavy.

Clean undergarments greatly appreciated. See and contemplate “Laundry Service Is Lacking,” above.

Men would appreciate razors. Razors for shaving are relatively expensive and temporary (they wear out quickly). It is the one thing we did not have with us that almost every male asked for: “Do you have any razors?”

“Marshmallow Nirvana”: Toward the end of conversation, we asked the GFP how they would sum up their homeless experience thus far. After reflecting briefly, one said “marshmallow nirvana.” He explained that they have plenty of free food, sleep under the stars, have access to shelter when they need it, read and relax all day. They agreed that being homeless turned out to be much easier and more pleasant than they had expected it to be. But it is not so for the majority of the homeless population.

Consider Serving the Homeless by Being Homeless: The GFP challenged us, as Christians, to consider becoming homeless ourselves as a way to serve the homeless. They noted the many homeless people who have great needs, especially those who do not know Christ, or are suffering from addiction or mental illness. What bet-

ter way to minister to them, and to intimately learn about their challenges, than to voluntarily live among them? (I see the logic in their point. Though I do not personally feel called to do this, John Christopher Frame chronicled his experience in his book *Homeless at Harvard: Finding Faith and Friendship on the Streets of Harvard Square* [Zondervan, 2013]).

Conclusion and Takeaways

I found the Urban Plunge to be a valuable part of the C.S. Lewis Institute Fellows Program experience. With so much of the program focused on reading, prayer, and interaction within cohorts, the experiential nature of the Plunge is an important enhancement to the Fellows' understanding of service and why it is needed.

My personal takeaways from the Plunge include the following:

1. Serve the Poor Where I Am. Now.

To the extent that I feel called to serve the poor, I should do so here and now, close to home. I confess to having a romantic notion of serving the poor overseas in short- or medium-term missions. But even if I feel a call to serve the poor overseas (or expect that I may hear such a call in the future), this is *not* a reason (an excuse?) to forgo serving the poor, the sick, widows, orphans, or those in prison here and *now* (as Jesus calls us to do).

2. There Is Wisdom, Power, and Comfort in Serving on a Team.

Jesus Christ was wise that when He sent out the seventy-two to prepare the way for Him, He sent them out in pairs (Luke 10:1–20). This wisdom was confirmed for me in my Plunge experience when we were likewise sent out to serve in teams. Working with a team allowed us to leverage the various gifts of all to accomplish the slightly uncomfortable task of engaging with strangers. The team also provided the encouragement, comfort, and accountability that come in working together. This is a good lesson that I will try to implement in ministry and in my professional and personal life.

3. Need I Discriminate among the Poor Whom I Serve to Separate the Truly Needy from the Truly Lazy?

The notion that many are “homeless by choice” was thought provoking me. Should it make any difference to me if they are homeless by choice? Throughout the Bible, Christians are commanded to serve the poor, widows and orphans; to visit those who are in prison; and help the sick (e.g., Ezek. 16:49; Isa. 1:17; Exod. 22:22–24; Matt. 25:31–40). Without doing a great deal of research, I do not recall Jesus laying out a precondition that we should serve only to the extent that people are in need as a result of forces beyond their control. Even if some people find themselves in need due to their own personal choices, they are still in need—that Jesus calls us as Christians to alleviate.

The book of James seems to instruct that, at least in within the walls of the church, we are not to discriminate between rich and poor, at James 2:1–5 (NIV):

My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, “Here’s a good seat for you,” but say to the poor man, “You stand there” or “Sit on the floor by my feet,” have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?

At the same time, the apostle Paul touches on the issue of the “lazy needy” in 2 Thessalonians 3:10–15 (*The Message*):

Don’t you remember the rule we had when we lived with you? “If you don’t work, you don’t eat.” And now we’re getting reports that a bunch of lazy good-for-nothings are taking advantage of you. This must not be tolerated. We command them to get to work immediately—no excuses, no arguments—and earn their own keep. Friends, don’t slack off in doing your duty.

If anyone refuses to obey our clear command written in this letter, don't let him get by with it. Point out such a person and refuse to subsidize his freeload. Maybe then he'll think twice. But don't treat him as an enemy. Sit him down and talk about the problem as someone who cares.

There is a good deal of sorting out to do here, especially within in the context of the contributions by and the treatment of worshipers in the local church. But it does not appear to me that this pending inquiry should hold me back from obedience to Jesus' call to serve the poor, the homeless, or the needy. In his very convicting book *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, Ron Sider touches upon this issue of the "lazy needy" when he observes that "God does not overlook the sin of those who are poor due to sloth or alcoholism. God punishes such sinners."¹

However, given Jesus' discussion of this topic and its direct relevance to my reception before the throne of heaven (Matt. 25:31–43, quoted below), it appears to me that the best course is to err on the side of being overly generous and compassionate, while balancing this against the need to be a faithful steward. To take the opposite path is to fall victim to the temptation to judge whom among the poor may be in that condition due to their own sin.

Surely, I am likewise guilty of much sin. I do not find myself among the materially poor in large measure due to God's grace, undeserved as it is.

For Reflection: Matthew 25:31–43 (NIV)

31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33 He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

34 "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 35 For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36 I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

37 "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? 38 When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? 39 When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

40 "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

41 "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. 42 For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'"



Giving to the poor—is an essential part of Christian morality . . . I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give.

C.S. Lewis

Notes

1. Ron Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, 5th ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005)



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