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Book Review

Disrupting Homelessness: Alternative Christian Approaches

Laura Stivers

Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011

Recent reports in Waterloo Region indicate that increased numbers of people are needing the services of Out of the Cold, soup kitchens, food banks and emergency shelters. The establishment of a supportive housing complex with thirty two apartments was to end the need for Out of the Cold. However, the apartments with supports are now full and the homeless population grows again.

Christians are volunteering and contributing money to emergency services out of charity and compassion. But these are short term solutions; federal and provincial governments promised that these programs would only be temporary, but they continue to grow while governments place funds in their other priorities or reduce taxes and have less money to expend.

Charity is important and necessary, says Laura Stivers, but it is inadequate. *Disrupting Homelessness* is a book that should be studied by adult education classes in congregations and used as a reflection tool for staff and volunteers in Out of the Cold, food banks, soup kitchens and emergency shelters. It is especially important as volunteers who've served many months or years become tired and overwhelmed.

Stivers says that faith communities should work for the safety of all people. The poor and the rich should be able to live in the same neighbourhood or community and be safe. With the increasing gap between the rich and poor, everyone is less safe. How do we combine compassion with justice to seek a community where all have enough?

North American mythologies of individualism, hard work, and equal opportunity have blinded us to the systems which create poverty and make it difficult for people to become middle class or economically self-reliant. Stivers describes and then analyzes a number of emergency shelters and the Habitat for Humanity. The shelters and Habitat perform good service, but are inadequate. In the shelters, some people get preferred treatment because they are cooperative. Others who find it difficult to live in a shelter are not understood and do not receive the necessary advantages to move forward with their lives.

This week I heard stories of two men who preferred to live "in the rough" or outside the shelter system. One had a dog and animals are not allowed. The other found the atmosphere stifling and dangerous for him; he was struggling to stay sober and there were too many other residents who either used or invited him to use. Both now have their own apartments. Stivers asked volunteers and staff to spend more time listening to the people in the programs. They had wisdom; they needed to articulate their needs. Were they able?



Habitat for Humanity only is able to assist those who can afford the expenses of a house. It's an important program for families who live just above the poverty line. Stivers' question throughout the book is whether staff, volunteers and other citizens can listen. Do the myths of hard work, equal opportunity, and individualism blind us to the systemic barriers to moving to economic freedom?

Our reflections are often defective: either we reflect through compassion and charity or we work on questions of justice and systemic change. Both are necessary! It will mean that we will not find easy answers and will continue to assist people struggling to keep a roof over their head while involved in political, social and economic action.

This is an excellent and thoughtful book. Stivers is bringing liberation theology into the North American context. Although her illustrations are from the USA, this book describes what is happening in Canada, especially as we too have a growing gap between rich and poor. Canada's federal and provincial governments have fewer and fewer dollars for affordable housing. Our churches and social service programs need to advocate for more and better affordable housing programs.

Charity is necessary; we cannot and should not allow people to suffer when we can provide food and housing. While doing charity, volunteers and other citizens need to listen to those who cannot provide enough food and appropriate housing for themselves and their families. How might they begin to solve their problems? How might we advocate for what they need as they perceive their situation? Is it higher wages, affordable housing, higher monthly welfare cheques, support services, health care, dental care, a sense of dignity instead of being stigmatized? Then volunteers along with people in the programs need to reflect together and sow seeds of justice. It's time to create communities where everyone is safe and has enough. Stivers helps us move in that direction. I agree that we should disrupt homelessness.

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