

Keith Wasserman is director of Good Works, Inc. a ministry working with the homeless in Athens, OH www.good-works.net Here's an article from him on what families could do to help the homeless. Enjoy, it will stretch your thinking.

WHAT IF?

*What if ordinary people wanted to take homeless people into their homes?
Is this as hard as we think? Could we organize a way to help each other do this?*

Twenty-nine years is a long time to care for the homeless every day, and there seem to be more homeless people in need of shelter today than when we first started. So, what is the solution to homelessness, and what are we really doing to address the problem of people without homes? Three words come to me again and again as I conclude that in order to help some people, the helpers have to extend themselves beyond traditional thinking. We have to face the realities of sacrifice, service and suffering. Can we do this looking through the lens of individualism? Absolutely not! Do some of us with homes believe we have anything we can say or do that will help homeless people, or must we relegate the solutions to this problem to the professionals and the agencies? I believe that there are some people who want to do more and also have the will to try new forms of hospitality. Don't we all want to love our neighbors in reality, and not merely in the abstract? Really, this is an old form of hospitality. Philoxenia—loving strangers. When Paul wrote to the Romans to “practice hospitality,” he was referring to a practice of taking travelers into the family home—of treating strangers like family for a day. Why is it that “the old way that is now the new way?” When did we stop treating strangers like family, and why? Maybe the role of organizations like Good Works is to use our experience and perspective to create new models for those who want to try things they have never done before.

So, here is a new idea for addressing the problem of homelessness: some people with homes, who have the desire and ability, should take homeless people into their homes. Again, I ask can we do this looking through the lens of individualism? Absolutely not! This is something that we must organize with others to make happen. Think of where any of us would be without the support that we have received. Are you and the communities that you are a part of ready to help support others? Here we simply begin with faith. We spell faith R.I.S.K. It's a change in how we think about things. So instead of just *going to* those without homes, we're combining our lives in a sense. It's easy to go somewhere and do something, or even have relationships within the boundaries of a certain place, when you know you will be leaving, but it is much different—much riskier—when we open all of our lives up to be shared, and in our own comfortable space. This will undoubtedly mean new growth in faith.

Do you want to try this in partnership with Good Works? Do you have a few close friends that are willing to support you? If you do your part, will your friends do their part? Together, we can go places that are unthinkable to go by ourselves. As we build high levels of trust with one another, we can do things unimaginable that can really help needy people. Is this too radical of an idea, ordinary people taking homeless people into their home? Have we been trained to think only inside the box? Perhaps building this strong trust is the first step—a commitment from several people to be together, to practice trust together *before* inviting other potentially hurting people into the picture. This seems pretty important if we want to love people as a community and not only individually.

Not everyone can do this. Some are in a season of life where this is not possible right now. Others simply don't have the facilities or have other limiting factors. But some people *can* do this and it is our job to create the possibility of innovation.

Conventional thinking tells me that if you want to really solve a social problem like homelessness, you form a non-profit, obtain a building, raise money, hire a staff and create a

shelter. To sustain your work, you raise more money, write policy, enforce standards and help people “come off the streets.” Isn’t that what we have done? Have we succeeded? Well...yes...but no. In many ways, we have succeeded because we have helped so many people over the years with comfort, accountability, guidance and understanding all through the love of God. We have provided food and shelter and an environment of true support and encouragement; supporting people over time and empowering some of them to make the good choices they wanted. And what we are doing should continue; and as we learn more, we should attempt to do it better. We can truly ask, “How can I love my neighbor as myself?” “What would I hope for if I lost my home and my livelihood?” “What do I have to offer someone in need?”

But I am envisioning a paradigm shift. I want to create a way for ordinary people who desire to explore this idea to take homeless people into their homes. I believe that, in the end, we need the poor as much or more as they need us. I think homeless people have something to impart to us that Bill Gates cannot buy. I think we can learn valuable things from the most needy of our communities. Again, some of this learning comes through the doors of sacrifice, service and “suffering-with.” We can struggle together to make the suffering person’s burden lighter, and in struggling together, we can grow closer, and break down our ideas of us versus them, and just become “us.” Why don’t we listen and learn from the suffering person, the person stuck in poverty, or in difficult circumstances that make them weak in the world’s eyes? When did people stop treating people the same? Why is that? Communities, in the truest sense, are people living together with common interests. What if **WE** were each other’s common interest? Why can’t we carry each other’s burdens—yes, even including neighbors we have not met yet?

Does the structure we have invented at the Good Works’ Timothy House offer opportunities to people with homes to really help people in our shelter? And, does this structure enable people with homes to be helped by those in our shelter? Do we see this as only a one-way helping relationship, and if so, is that good? I am struggling with these issues and I think we can do much more in this arena. For years, we have invited people into a PLACE. People who need help and people who want to help come to this PLACE. This is an opportunity to invite people into a WAY of being and living. This WAY is the place in which we find we all need one another. Once we find people who are interested in taking people into their homes, I suspect God wants us to think about both the problems and the solutions the homeless face, and have a series of very frank discussions about the risks and opportunities. But our experience over the years does count for something, and I believe we have wisdom and the ability to mentor people who want to participate in this form of loving-kindness. We want to continue helping those without homes by expanding our ability to connect people. We are called to connect people from all walks of life for the glory of God. Will you join us in this work?

So what about asking people to consider taking homeless people into their homes? Why not? Let me discuss three issues that I believe are legitimate concerns but can be overcome. This is not intended to be an exhaustive list.

1. Fear of the unknown. People are reluctant to take strangers into their homes because, to be honest, we don’t know what we are really getting ourselves into. I find this a very legitimate concern. But can we think through this or around this from another angle? What if we in faith, together with others we trust who will walk with us in this process, take the ‘plunge’ into this unusual form of helping people? What if we didn’t do it alone? Could that matter? Would taking this journey with a few others walking with us give us the courage we need to do it? What if we were able to build some trust with the homeless people before we took them into our homes? What if Good Works facilitated a range of

opportunities for ordinary people to build trusting relationships with homeless people before they were invited into our homes? Then, while one or two people would actually share some of their living space, there would be others who would agree to provide other defined areas of support. What if a small group of friends and family enter into this venture together? Someone stays in my home, but Rick will step up to provide some transportation. Rita and Bill may help with some of the additional food costs, and Jerry will intentionally spend time with our guest each week. In this way, one person makes room in their home, but a close-knit community of people makes room in their social lives. Do you have a supportive community willing to help? The community of Good Works will gladly provide on-going support, guidance and perspective.

2. For many, our post-modern life-styles don't naturally incorporate this form of hospitality. Many people value privacy over community and are reluctant to give up both their psychological and physical space. We have become so accustomed to our freedom, built in part by our affluence, that we hesitate to share our space and resources with people who seem to have a high level of need and with whom we have a low level of trust. This is a reality that we need to work through by prayer, conversation, ruthless honesty and risking-love. This piece should not be rushed, but at the same time, we should be careful not to get stuck here. What if a small group of people decided to share responsibility for creating a supportive environment for a homeless person? What if, together, we did something heroic? These things are difficult for some of us, but are possible when we trust one another and do them together: practicing giving up some of the psychological/physical space that we've convinced ourselves we desperately need. We might just need to retrain these appetites, along with asking God for hands that are open to receive *and* to give freely. Changes could start small, and could be new territory for some, even something simple like beginning to share meals regularly with people outside of one's immediate family, or creating regular space to spend time being with people you wouldn't normally. We need reminded that some of the things we think we really need are actually just covering up something deeper that's going on. There are certainly things that you are **already** doing that make room for strangers in your life. Perhaps there are ways that you could build upon these.
3. Dependency—in a culture that teaches us that independence is normal, we tend to be apprehensive of people depending upon us. We resist the pressure that comes from having a layer of responsibility to people both because we have come to believe that it is not healthy for them, and because it is not healthy for us. But is this value Christian or American? Or have we assumed that since this is an American value, it is automatically a biblical value. Have we also assumed, through the lens of individualism, that the only way for us to care for homeless people in our homes is when we do it by ourselves? Maybe the “sign” we are looking for to take this “plunge” comes when people we know and trust say to us “I’ll help you with that.” Who are the people that would join you in this step of faith to create a Christian community? Who already has? We need to be balanced with the wisdom to know our limits and to know when helping becomes enabling or harmful. We need the wisdom found in community to reflect back to us both the good and the bad of our relationships with people in crisis.

I have a dream that some people in our community would like to explore what it might mean to open up our homes to the homeless. I believe that there are people both with the resources and

the psychological and spiritual maturity to take this risk because of the particular stage or season of life they are in.

What if these very people, open to exploring this adventure, would take the first step by volunteering at The Timothy House with the intention of getting to know a few homeless people? What if there were a few homeless people who, from the first day they entered our shelter, expressed an interest in living with a single person or a family in response to our question about their future? And what if we were able to match interested singles or families with interested homeless people? Could this model work? At Good Works we are beginning to explore these ideas.

From the very beginning, anyone interested in the possibility of having a homeless person move into their home must begin to ask a series of questions of themselves. These questions are intended to help explore our legitimate limits. These questions serve as a catalyst to think through a range of issues and possibilities. Maybe thinking and talking is a good first step.

- How much do we value privacy and how much privacy am I willing to give up?
- Can God develop in me the attitude that what was once inconvenient can become an opportunity of worship which can give another person meaningful hope?
- What are the indications that I can really begin to trust someone who is a stranger to me? What are the signs that I don't trust someone and why? How do I know who to trust and who not to trust? What role do my friends play in this process? Am I willing to submit to a few friends as I take these steps of faith? Am I willing to submit to a few GW staff people in this process?
- How do I feel about someone depending upon me who is vulnerable? Do I fear I might take advantage of them? Do I fear they might take advantage of me?
- What are my expectations regarding how long it will take for someone to really get 'back on their feet' (if ever)? How long of an initial commitment am I comfortable making for this person who will move into my house? Should they agree to help with household chores?
- What about economics? Do I provide everything for this person? How do we negotiate their responsibilities in the house with the benefits of the house? Are they a "guest?" What is the best role for me and for them? What is the best language to describe their stay with us that facilitates dignity, responsibility and compassion?
- What is the hidden side of this risking adventure? Could I become a transformed person? Could this adventure bring out my best self? Am I going down a road that could lead to new thinking, new ideas and new ways of loving that truly fulfills me? Is sacrifice, service and suffering (however un-American) the real door through which life becomes full and abundant after all?
- How can we help someone do as much for themselves as possible?
- Would I be OK with having someone stay with me long-term, or would a short-term commitment be better?
- What are my expectations of the person who would come and stay? How would they treat my house, my family, and me?
- Can a person who comes to stay with me have friends and family over? What kind of boundaries do I need to ask him or her to follow?
- Do we need to have monthly checkpoints, when we come together with staff to ask honest and hard questions about how things are going?

- What kind of privacy do I need? How do I feel about having houseguests? What is hard for me about hospitality? What comes naturally?
- What are my own biases and fears?
- What difficult questions do I need people to ask me (that I don't necessarily want to ask, but need to)?
- What kind of support and accountability and community do we need?
- What kinds of difficult situations or circumstances can we anticipate?
- How can I realign my fears of losing space (all kinds) and these things that I think I need?
- What can I offer someone in need?
- Who are the people in my life that support me, and would they be willing to enter into this service with me?
- What communities am I a part of that could help a homeless person succeed?

As I see through a glass dimly, organizations like Good Works are in an excellent position to help facilitate (match) relationships between those who need help and those who want to help. While we are not experts, we do have some God-given experience and expertise.

If the match doesn't work out, can the homeless person return to our shelter? Yes. Indeed, this is a model we have been using for years when residents move to The Hannah House and it can now be applied in a broader sense. In some ways, there are a few similarities to foster-care.

What if ordinary people wanted to take homeless people into their own homes? What if Good Works staff would mentor them and coach them? What if the Good Works community would screen the residents first? What if you wanted to do this? Then I suggest you start the conversation with us. I'll have much more to say at that point.

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