

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

I am pleased to have this opportunity to share what Beacon House is doing and what we are learning in our work sheltering those who would be otherwise living rough. BUC is a strong supporting member of the Beacon House Interfaith Society. Your Board member, Lorraine DeLuca is both an active member of the Board and one of the volunteers who go to the Beacon House Shelter each Tuesday or Wednesday morning to prepare healthy meals a week in advance.

Karen Parnell is a member of what we call the Beacon House Shelter Leadership Support Team. Not only does she coordinate the volunteers who prepare the meals, she has also led some very successful fundraising initiatives for the Shelter.

Darrell J., Cliff D., and Roger. S. are members of a Beacon House fundraising team.

Use PowerPoint slides here to show photos and data about the Retail Store, Food Bank, Shelter and Pallets.

Given your many years of supporting Beacon House, I assume that you are quite familiar with its operation so I'm not going to say too much about it. Rather, I want to speak about the broader social, political, economic and ethical context in which we are trying serve some of the rapidly growing number of persons living rough or unhoused in the communities of HRM.

(about 1250 in HRM and those in the know expect another 200 to 300 this summer).

If I had just now run out of time and I had to make a closing comment, this would be it: The Beacon House Shelter and new Pallets, indeed all shelters everywhere should be only temporary and transitional. They should not become homes or a way of life. But we have a serious problem, a crisis here in HRM, across Nova Scotia, indeed in every province and beyond. There is a terrible shortage of every type of housing, especially affordable housing. How can a shelter be temporary and transitional if there is nowhere to go next?

Certainly, as a community and a church, local and national, we don't need another crisis. In my learning about homelessness as a social, political and economic crisis, it has occurred to me that for us churchgoers, it is relatively new compared to those that have been weighing heavily on our minds and have been dominating our public discourse for so long. We church members who are able to go to church and be actively involved in church life, we think, worry, and pray about climate change, how our hospitals are overwhelmed, how food costs are escalating, the high cost of living, fires, floods, the wars and atrocities in Ukraine and Palestine, and acts of terrorism, to name only some. The shortage of doctors and nurses or classroom teachers affects us, our families, and neighbors more

personally than the conditions suffered by those living rough. The terrible realities for those living on the streets never affected us so directly as they do now. In the past, we heard or read about them but we didn't see and feel them where we live.

Homelessness used to be elsewhere, in the city, downtown, on the sidewalk or at the intersection waiting for the traffic light to change. Yes, it was easy to be like the priest and Levite in our scripture lesson, to pass by on the other side. I have been a Levite many times. I kept the side window up and didn't make eye contact as someone approached our vehicle with a Tim's cup out-stretched. But it's much harder to close a blind eye today. Now, it is not so easy now to pass by on the other side. The other side is just as crowded with tents, encampments, and those reaching out with the Tim's cup.

I have been studying the contemporary literature on homelessness. I was so unaware. I suggest that we are so unaware in our relatively comfortable way of life. There is so much we should learn. I am becoming more convinced that our local churches and national church should be more aware and have a greater understanding of homelessness.

To make you aware of how we are really unaware, let me explain one of the biggest Canadian housing or unhoused issues and then briefly introduce what is widely recognized as the best

approach to address the housing/unhoused crisis---2 important pieces of information, among several others, about which I had no idea until I became involved in this work.

Section 7 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms proclaims: “Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person . . .” The problem has been and continues to be that the right to security of person does not cover housing even sheltering or living in tents. The right to housing is termed as a negative right only whereas the right to such services as health care, education, social assistance and police protection are positive rights. In other words, governments must provide hospitals and schools---positive rights---but not housing or even shelters. A few court cases have successfully argued for housing being at least a negative right, meaning that persons cannot be evicted or renoevicted if they have nowhere else to go. How soon can we reach the stage where Canadians have a right to housing just as we have a right to health care? With Nova Scotia already funding shelters and the federal government talking about building affordable housing quickly, maybe we don’t have to wait on the courts.

Regarding the best approach or strategy to reduce the number of those who are unhoused, it is known as “Housing First”. The approach has been formally adopted in Canada, the US, New Zealand and several European nations as the most effective way

moving forward or upward to address homelessness. Let me explain.

Suppose a man living rough shows up on a cold winter night at a shelter in a pretty bad state, cold, wet, hungry, needing a shower and very intoxicated. The standard traditional reaction from shelter staff would be if and when you get yourself sober and cleaned up, we can place you in one of the apartments or housing units funded by the government. The First Housing approach says if the person is housed right away in an apartment or rooming house, it is much easier and more likely that achieving sobriety can be achieved if the appropriate wrap-around supports are provided. Making the point another way, I enjoy a beer or glass of wine. If I was hungry, wet and cold, living on the street, month after month, downing the whole 6-pack or bottle of wine just might be my way of getting through a cold night on the street or in my tent. If suddenly I had my own room, a shower, clean clothing and some addiction support, I would get myself back on my feet much more quickly than trying to do it alone.

The most well-known case where First Housing solved the homeless problem is in Helsinki, the capital of Finland. My time is running out so I will just give you the numbers. Helsinki has a population of over a million. In the mid 1980's, Finland tackled the housing problem as a nation and adopted the "Housing

First” strategy. Through the decades, the government bought up and built apartment buildings and hired hundreds of support workers to work with those in the apartments who really needed support if they were to be successful. Between 1985 and 2016, the number of supported housing units in Helsinki soared from 127 to 1309 and independent low-cost rentals went from 65 to 2,433. The overnight shelter spaces for living rough plummeted from 2,121 to 52. Now there is only one Shelter in Helsinki and usually it is not full. A fascinating story about how the Housing First approach was so successful in Helsinki. Municipal, provincial and federal leaders across Canada should hear the story. HRM and Nova Scotia should hear the story.

Housing First has been or is being tried in places such as Medicine Hat, Alberta, Quebec, Boston, and Ireland.

My purpose this morning is to simply make a start at raising our collective awareness as a church. We should become more aware and better informed, so that we can try to influence our members of municipal, provincial and federal governments as they seek ways to meet this challenge head-on and successfully.

Let me get back to Beacon House. Those of us who work as volunteers or staff have some real sense of how the Good Samaritan felt when he did not pass by on the other side. And I

know that many of you as active followers of Christ know how he felt because of the many good works that you do.

Show video, “Voices of Light” [here](#). The video can be accessed on the Beacon House website.

“Who is my neighbor?” Our scripture lesson ends with “The one who was kind to him.”

Thank BUC for being such a good neighbor!