

The Rev. Heather Mueller
Priest-in-Charge
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
Taft, California



A MINISTRY WHICH IS MEANT TO BE.....

Since I have lived in Taft, for four and a half years now, I have noticed a relatively large number of people who are either homeless or surfing on sofas from friend to relative and back again. I have also noticed that there are very few support systems in place in this community. Homelessness is illegal in Taft and the city bathrooms have even been locked. I was complaining heartily about this situation and a friend who was tired of hearing me complain, said, "OK, I am going to start serving sandwiches...to whomever comes and could we use the church courtyard"?

We started serving baloney and peanut butter sandwiches last year in August and what has happened is amazing. This ministry has literally exploded in numbers...support...food...money...people who serve and people who are served!

The ministry now feeds 35 to 50 people each evening. We serve full healthy meals and we serve, inside the parish hall around a very large table which was donated by the Fort here in Taft.

We are now receiving more food than we can use and several of my friends....members of the Rotary Club, members of AAUW and others often put \$100 and \$50 bills into my hand to be directed to the feeding program.

People bring food from their restaurants and people who have gatherings for weddings, funerals and other parties bring food and in some cases I believe these folks actually over -buy and prepare so as to have food left to share.

The congregation at St. Andrew's is very small and even though I have tried in every way I can think of to increase the size of the congregation, I have not been able to do it.

Last summer, when we had a supply priest, five people came to worship and I was not pleased!!!! Since our bishop was visiting the following Sunday, I thought it was time to say..."Close this church"! He happened be present for the dinner program the night before (we served the people's favorite...Shepherd's pie... For the visit of the Shepherd!) and at least 50 people showed up. When Bishop David said, "This is your congregation" I felt the weight lift off of my shoulders. I now feel committed to the feeding program. The maintenance of the facility and cooking is my work. The Holy Eucharist on Sunday with my small and faithful congregation is the frosting on the cake. This was articulated by Father Jim Seiple and I thank him for this insight.

I have gotten to know a good number of the people who come to eat the meals served here at St. Andrew's, Taft. I have learned a lot about the circumstances of homelessness.

1. The issue is very complex. There are many layers to consider. It is a very difficult and many layered challenge for communities across The USA and the numbers seem to be growing.

2. Some of the root issues for homelessness are in childhood via neglect and abuse.....the use of drugs, I believe, is secondary and is a way, people use, to ease the pain. Children with undiagnosed learning disabilities, (for example) and other issues are perhaps misunderstood by parents and often bullied by other children. In Taft, and I believe other communities, children are being raised by people who are not always loving and emotionally healthy people. "The parents do eat sour grapes and it does put the children's teeth on edge!" (Ezekiel 18:2.)

3. When people say things like..."They are busing people in from Bakersfield and LA", I believe they are looking for ways to avoid responsibility.

4. When people say that feeding the homeless people is only a way to make them more dependent I believe they are wrong....and also correct!!! The food boxes and feeding programs can be a way for the people who are secure, to feel good about "Doing Something "and it is also a way for some to take advantage and get a free meal.... and ...Jesus says that we will always have the poor among us. These issues are there to be sure. Soooo what is a caring Christian meant to do???

It seems to me that the challenge is similar to the understanding of the Holy Trinity. It is there for us and it is not going to go away. Even though, Trinity Sunday is (a day when I would like to avoid preaching and be away on vacation!!!) it is there, in my face, and deal with it I must! The people who are homeless are in our midst and they are not going away. We need to realize that the challenges are complex and they need to be pondered and prayerfully considered by the communities in a responsible way. Support for children and people in poverty is a huge part of the challenge. The Gospel which calls us to feed the hungry is calling us to consider all of the ways people hunger.

A book which I have read recently is, "\$2.00 A DAY" by Kathryn J. Edin and H. Luke Shaefer. It is 177 pages about how the systems have failed over the last several decades. Perhaps to have a good understanding about the challenge is a place to begin.

All I know is this...I am feeling good about the ministry we are experiencing here in Taft at this time. The fact that it has been supported by so many people seems to testify to the importance of it.....so for now this is what is happening.

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