

## “THE HOME OF FAITH”

Interfaith Symposium on Homelessness  
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November 17, 2007

I hope I speak to you this morning simply as one of you and one with you as religious leaders, people of faith, persons of many faiths.

I am the university president who gave the green light to and actively became involved in hosting Tent City 3 on our campus. The first university we know of, after many churches, to do so.

I was the chair of the board of United Way with its special initiative, beyond all others, to end homelessness.

I serve on the Governing Council of the Committee to End Homelessness.

I am a member of the special United Way Campaign to End Chronic Homelessness by raising 25 million dollars these two years and leveraging it for providing houses for the 2,000 chronically homeless persons whose names we already know.

I do all these things, but I am just like you and one with you because all I do is do what I can do from my position—even if it is as a university president—just as you do what you can do from your position of leadership. Most importantly, I do what I can for the homeless out of a motivation of faith—in my case Christian—try to do it the way Christ would do it—as would the prophets of Judaism and Islam—and try to bring along and lead the rest of the faith community to which I belong as you try to lead your own faith communities.

We are very much in this together and we are one in this in our faiths. This is a very, very good place to be.

As we look today in this interfaith symposium on how our faith communities and our service organizations can work together to end homelessness we should be aware of a couple of things.

Let me be frank, I do what I do for homelessness—even if it is the rather dull thing of serving on boards—completely because of my religious conviction. Perhaps I should be embarrassed to admit that—in that I should do it anyhow out of a humanitarian motivation—but I am not embarrassed to say I do it for a faith reason, a religious reason. I happen to believe that many who work to end homelessness while doing it out of a humanitarian motivation are not aware of how much that very humanitarian inspiration in fact has deep religious origins and roots and branches and prophets even though these religious strands are obscured. I think it makes a difference in what we focus on about homelessness, how we go about working on it, how we relate with the homeless, and what we want for them and for us if, like me, you and your faith community, the motivation is religious.

- I believe it keeps us focused more on home than house—home, which is a central, maybe even the central, religious theme—of all our faiths. (It is for this reason, among others, that I object to the phrase “Homeland Security” as it mythologizes “nation” into the semi-religious “home”.)
- I mentioned a moment ago that we already know the names of the 2000 chronically homeless we are seeking to serve. We also know from our religions the names of all the

homeless, and the names are “Beloved of God”, “Anawim”, “the Blessed”, even “Christ” in that “whatever you do for one of these you do for me”. To me this makes a difference.

- I believe that what we are really working for, what we want, the outcome we seek and are willing to be measured by is not houses, nor even homes, not 2,000 or 8,000 persons, but that what we seek is for the alienated homeless to become part of and contributing to a community. In our religions we are about communities; what we seek is not quite adequately expressed by a house or home with wrap-around services, but rather persons living in, welcomed in, connected to and, contributing to a community. That is our outcome and that shapes what we do and how we do it.

The other thing I think is important for us to consider is that we who are part of an inter-faith, multi-faith, many-faithed, but clearly-faithed commitment to end homelessness, in fact live in the most unchurched, unsynagogued, unmosqued part of the United States.

Does this make a difference for tackling homelessness? Yes, it does. For churches, temples, mosques, prayer places, shrines serve not only for prayer, worship, religious ritual and celebration, and instruction, but they also serve the unique purpose of bringing together people who are quite different from one another except for faith. Our holy places are a primary generator of social capital. In most parts of the country the primary way people come together, get to know one another, build up strength together, reach out, take on social initiatives is through their churches. The role of churches in generating the social capital, the collaborative where-with-all, to tackle homelessness should not be underestimated.

I do not believe we are nearly enough aware as we should be of how being in “the None Zone”—“None” as the response of persons in this region to the question of whether they have a religious affiliation, by far the highest percentage of any part of the country—impacts the social capital for the task/service/ministry/relationship we are working on today.

- This means that our religious voice here in our region needs to be heard more than anywhere else in America.
- This means that we have a greater responsibility to animate our communities as leaven for the rising of housed/homed/communitied dough.
- This means that in our relatively, but substantially un-churched, un-synagogued, un-mosqued context we need—more than anywhere else—to be more collaborative with service organizations and with people of different motivations and different life/death views from ours.

Let me, by conclusion, bring this home.

Each of our faiths demands and inspires and holds us accountable to serve, help, learn from, and be one with the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, ill, imprisoned—which is above all a long list for one word: the homeless.

Home is the central theme of where our God is and where our God leads us. Home.

In our faith we have a home that is unassailable—which is extraordinarily rare because few people have an unassailable home—even if we are housed in that home only through faith.

Each of us, no matter who we are, or what position we hold, is simply asked to do what we can. In that we are together, at home with one another.

A criterion I use as a religious person in this matter of how to work to end homelessness, as well as in other issues, is: "To do what we do best for those who need us most." What is that we as communities of faith do best for the homeless persons who need us most? And who are the homeless who most need what we do best?

And finally as people of faith we take the long view, which is the view of justice not charity. The long view that pushes to the permanent rather than the transitional and to the connected in community that overcomes the worst suffering of the homeless is their alienation. Religion is about overcoming alienation. That too is what we are about today.

May our work be blessed by our God.