

Ole Anthony: End homelessness

We could do it, if every religious and nonprofit organization in Dallas reached out and took someone in

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Maybe you've heard about the Dallas Project, a program the Trinity Foundation started in 1987 to address the problem of homelessness. Then again, it's more likely that you haven't.



Dallas responded to those displaced by hurricanes Katrina and Rita, but what of its own homeless?

It's been a big bust.

Actually, it's only our effort to get other groups involved that's busted. The methodology itself – of a small group of people taking responsibility for a homeless person or family – does work. We've experienced it for more than 20 years. But it's a hard sell. The Dallas Project concept is that if every church, synagogue, mosque and temple in America were to take in just one or two homeless people or families, homelessness in America would be eradicated overnight.

This method is effective precisely for the reason that welfare programs do not work: The interaction is human, not programmatic. Rather than further alienating welfare "clients," we draw them into a caring community, which is what they desperately need, both psychologically and spiritually.

When our community agreed that this was a priority, it was a transforming moment for us. Some of our families have had a succession of people living in their homes for years. Hundreds of needy folks have received help.

But more important, their presence has provided a way for us – and our kids – to escape the selfishness that permeates our culture and us.

It's an intangible that's hard to communicate. Except for the occasional Thanksgiving meal or handout, most congregations feel that the poor are the responsibility of government and social welfare professionals. This attitude reminds me of an incident that has recurred over the years around our neighborhood:

A stray cat wanders by. Someone feeds it with no intention of taking responsibility, gets that warm feeling of doing good and then later is surprised to find the cat crying outside the door.

Sure, the kitty is glad to get some food at the moment. A homeless person is grateful for a handout, no doubt. But both of them really need something different.

Dallas' religious community responded admirably to the crisis of hurricane victims. But the poverty problem on Dallas streets is increasingly ignored.

With City Proposition 14, on bonds for a homeless assistance center, up for a vote Nov. 8, I offer a different proposal, a modest one (with apologies to Jonathan Swift):

Nationally, there are more than 1.3 million churches, synagogues, mosques, temples and other nonprofit organizations, most of which have "meeting human need" in their charters. Donations to them are tax deductible. And, at any given time, there are about 600,000 homeless people, most of them in big cities.

Let each city council reinstate anti-vagrancy and panhandling laws. But instead of placing the violators in jail, take them to the nearest abandoned military base.

(Surely some of the billions the government is already spending on the homeless could be used to repurpose these facilities to include drug and alcohol treatment centers and medical facilities.)

Then, every nonprofit organization in the area would be placed on a list and assigned one or more of the people or families who are in custody, according to each organization's income.

Ten to 20 people in each organization would be responsible for the welfare of that individual or family. They would provide housing and help find jobs and medical, dental or legal assistance – or face revocation of their charitable tax exemption by the IRS.

Don't like my proposal? Think government shouldn't intrude into these matters?

Then instead, let's all start obeying the clear words of Jesus (and the Torah) to love our neighbor as ourselves.

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