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Charles P. Morgan: Patience, time, trust — and relationships that lead to restoration

By [CHARLES P. MORGAN](#) |

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Are we bold enough to ask the hard questions that can lead to lasting change?

Homelessness is far more often confined to the shadows, hidden from view. It's coming to the fore, and we're thinking about it more.

I'm speaking of the tent encampment in south Minneapolis along Hiawatha and Cedar avenues, where 300 have gathered under one sky to live together, and maybe to make a sort of statement to the world.

What are they saying? Some say they are safer. This community is better than going it alone. Others openly talk of drug abuse, or that this is their last chance.

I believe that none of us would wish these conditions on our fellow men and women. If we love our neighbors as ourselves, we will want what's best for them. So, our consciences are stirred.

Most who are homeless are away from family, have lost jobs, or even their health. Their situation is a symptom of a personal dilemma that has led to desperation and a lack of hope.

The truth is that each person needs to be restored as an individual. Food and shelter are a step toward that, but the issues behind the homelessness run far deeper. Are we willing to have a frank and honest discussion about those issues?

Restoration can only take place with longer-term, or what I call sustained, intervention that is specific to each person's needs. This is what leads people to the stability of a home and greater self-sufficiency. That's the desired outcome.

What happened with their families? What hurts are driving them to medicate the pain with illegal and addictive drugs? Why have they turned away from others who were in their lives?

I hear people's stories all the time, and they are rough. I also meet many who have been transformed, who are on the rebound.

There's a lot of emotional and psychological trauma or injury out there on the streets. And, people make decisions based on that trauma. Extenuating circumstances can drive the choice to stay away from those who offer lasting help, those who can get them on the right track for the long term.

Case in point — close to our St. Paul mission campus serving homeless men, there is another homeless encampment nearby. This one is behind the buildings, down by the railroad tracks and out of view.

Our staff visit there regularly. They ask people if they are tired of their way of living, if they want something different. Help is but a block away. Most will stay where they are.

That is the story of between 9,300 and 15,000 homeless people in Minnesota each night. Compared to the Minneapolis encampment, they're the 97 percent. The estimates are from recent Wilder Foundation research.

There are many shelters available. There's job training, fellowship, accountability, counseling, all those things. But taking advantage of these requires a choice. There has to be a will, a desire for positive changes in life.

The people in the Minneapolis encampment will eventually find food and housing, but it will only be temporary. Within weeks, there will be a call for more long-term solutions. Serving people without developing their full potential will not yield positive outcomes.

For those who are too impaired, we talk about the need for scaffolding and ongoing supportive interventions. These are then followed by skills training to live life, and to sustain a job.

What's needed are bold efforts to form relationships with these individuals. That requires patience, and takes time. As trust is built, more helpful assistance can be given and advice can be heard.

Otherwise, it's just a matter of geography as people move from one encampment to another.

Whether in a tent, a trailer or mansion, the situation is very much the same if the homeless person is opposed to change.

Those of us who are outside of these situations and live what we might call normal lives can have a hard time understanding the plight of the homeless person. It's something we should think about. Will we, as a society, wrestle with the difficulties that are driving this developing trend of homelessness, poverty and isolation?

We need to make ourselves available to be our brother's keeper. There are many Twin Cities groups that can help.

Dr. Charles P. Morgan is CEO of Union Gospel Mission Twin Cities.



Charles P. Morgan

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