

Beyond Homelessness

by Brian J. Walsh

You're standing on a street corner.

Right in front of you, idling at the red light in his BMW, is a well-dressed guy in his mid-forties. And right beside you is a guy, about the same age, sitting on the sidewalk, looking like he's slept in those filthy clothes for who knows how long, holding out his hand, begging for money.

Which one of these guys is homeless?

I know, it seems like a dumb question. The guy panhandling on the street has "homeless" written all over him. He might even have a sign advertising that he is homeless and asking for help.

The guy sitting on the sidewalk is homeless, and while we don't know that much about the man in the car, his clothes, hairstyle, cleanliness and his impressive BMW all indicate that the one thing this motorist is not is homeless.

So if a group of people were organizing a conference called 'Beyond Homelessness' you would probably think that these people were going to talk about how to help our panhandler friend on the street, how to facilitate a transition from the street to stable accommodation, how to build more affordable housing, perhaps how to engage in advocacy in solidarity with those who are homeless and propose new housing policy to the various levels of government. And if these people were Christians you would likely think that they will talk about things like justice and compassion, and maybe how churches can work together with government and the business sector to address the tragic reality of homelessness.

And you would be right.

But you know, I'm still thinking about that guy in the BMW. Is it really so clear that the sidewalk sitter is homeless and the fancy car driver isn't? I mean maybe our panhandler friend is a Christian, down on his luck. He's a guy who has had a deep experience of coming home to Jesus. The BMW dude? Not so much. In fact, his life has no spiritual depth beyond the spirited way in which he drives that car. So which one of these guys is homeless?

And while neither of our two friends have been able to sustain a long term relationship with a woman in their lives, the sidewalk guy is well known and respected in a community of other homeless friends who share a squat sometimes, or a case of beer, or tell each other which of the shelters doesn't have bed bugs. He's part of a community. He has a place amongst these other street folk. The well off guy in the car doesn't sleep in shelters, he's got a very well-appointed apartment that is generally a lonely place unless he's picked up someone in a bar and she's over for the night. But even that is lonely.

Truth be known, while our rich friend has his place in a large corporation, managing a staff of twenty folks under him, he doesn't really have a community that mounts to much.

So again, which one of these guys is homeless?

It is time for Christians to be homemakers in a world of homelessness. It is time for Christians to offer the good news of homecoming in Jesus. And it is time that we revisited our limited ideas of who is homeless.

Brian J. Walsh is the co-author of *Beyond Homelessness: Christian Faith in a Culture of Displacement*. Walsh serves as a Christian Reformed Campus minister at the University of Toronto where he also teaches theology at Wycliffe and Trinity Colleges.

Brian Walsh will be the Keynote Speaker at *Beyond Homelessness – The Church and Affordable Housing Forum 2011*. Panelists such as Mayor Gregor Robertson, and Craig Crawford from BC Housing will respond to Brian's ideas. We invite you to participate in workshops, visit the Ethical Marketplace and Booth area, and network with others from your area over lunch. The *Forum* will be held at Tenth Church, 11 West 10th Avenue, Vancouver on Friday, Oct 28, 12 - 5 PM and Saturday, Oct 29, 8:30 AM to 5:00 PM. For more information or to register visit www.cglf.ca.