

The New City Initiative

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Special report on project to engage faith communities in ending homelessness

■ In 2010, 19,040 students in Oregon public schools were counted as homeless. Under federal definitions, students are considered homeless if they lack a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence.

Source: www.ode.state.or.us/news/announcements/announcement.aspx?c=6056

■ According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) 2009 Annual Homelessness Assessment, nearly four in ten (37.8 percent) sheltered homeless adults has a disability, as compared with 15.5 percent of the overall U.S. population.

Source: www.hudhre.info/documents/5thHomelessAssessmentReport.pdf

■ On one night in Portland and Multnomah County, 2,727 people were “literally homeless” (defined as sleeping in an emergency shelter, vouchered into a motel or unsheltered).

Source: www.portlandonline.com/phb/index.cfm?c=43985

Origins of the project

The New City Initiative began in 2010 as an innovative collaboration between Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon (EMO) and JOIN (www.joinpdx.com), a Portland-based nonprofit agency supporting people experiencing homelessness in their efforts to end their homelessness.

Startup funding for the project was provided through a grant from the Louisville Institute (www.louisville-institute.org), a subsidiary of the Lilly Endowment. The Louisville Institute’s mission is to enrich the religious life of American Christians and to encourage the revitalization of their institutions by bringing together those who lead religious institutions with those who study them, so that the work of each might inform and strengthen the other.

The New City Initiative was first conceived as an experimental project exploring two complementary principles. The first principle is that *the key to ending homelessness lies in rebuilding relationships and community*. The second principle is that *ancient models of religious community and philanthropy can inform contemporary efforts of congregations to engage with people who have experienced homelessness*.

Homelessness as a breakdown in relationships and community

There are many factors that enter into homelessness, such as job loss, physical or mental disability, domestic violence, mental illness, or drug and alcohol addiction. But JOIN’s 18-year history of working with people experiencing homelessness strongly suggests that an important factor that is often overlooked is *the breakdown of relationships and community that occurs when people become homeless*.

People often “hit bottom” and become homeless when all their relationships are broken and they have no door left to which they can turn. It frequently seems to be the case that people become homeless not when they run out of money, but when they run out of relationships.

The corollary to this reality is that *a reestablishment of relationships and community is key to ending homelessness*. People who are experiencing and transitioning out of homelessness need many things: food, clothing, shelter, employment. But what they need perhaps more than anything else are healthy, positive and supportive relationships that can literally make the difference between staying housed or becoming homeless again.

It has been JOIN’s experience that people transitioning out of homelessness who do not have a community of support are often unable to sustain themselves in their housing—they may sink into depression after being housed, return to unhealthy relationships, addictions or other coping mechanisms, and eventually spiral out of housing and back into homelessness.

The statistics with regard to homelessness are daunting. The 2011 Point in Time Survey of Homelessness in Portland and Multnomah County indicates that on one night 2,727 people in Portland and Multnomah County were “literally homeless” (defined as sleeping in an emergency shelter, vouchered into a motel or unsheltered). Worse, it is broadly recognized that such surveys do not count the entire homeless population; the actual number of homeless people in Multnomah County may range anywhere from 3,000 to 5,000 people at any given time.

The good news, however, is that there are over 500 congregations in Portland alone. This means that if each congregation were to find a way to develop supportive relationships with just ten people who have experienced homelessness, the faith community could initiate a process of transformation in the dynamic of homelessness, not only in Portland, but in other cities throughout Oregon and across the United States.



Photo credit: JOIN

On one night in Portland and Multnomah County, 2,727 people were “literally homeless” (defined as sleeping in an emergency shelter, vouchered into a motel or unsheltered).

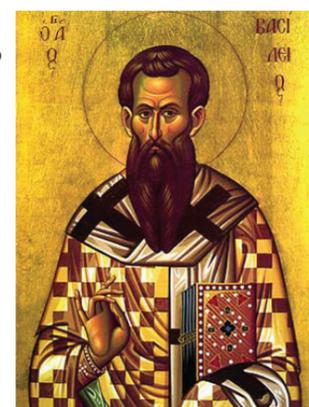
The New City – A new/old model of Christian community

A great deal of the initial inspiration for the New City Initiative came from the life and writings of Basil of Caesarea.

Basil was a Christian born in Caesarea, in a region of modern-day Turkey near the Black Sea, where he later served as a priest and then a bishop. He lived during a unique and pivotal point in the history of Christianity. During the first few centuries of Christian history, individual Christians sought to carry out their faith by sharing what they had and caring for those in need; given the sometimes hostile attitude towards the Church in the Roman Empire, however, there was little opportunity for the Church to consider what a more organized or systematic approach to matters of poverty might look like.

All this began to change in the fourth century, as Christianity became first a legal religion, and then the official religion of the Roman Empire. Basil was one of the first to attempt to envision and articulate what it might mean for the Church to take responsibility for the ills of the society in an organized and intentional way.

In 369, shortly after Basil was ordained a priest, a terrible



Basil of Caesarea, fourth century Christian figure who founded the “New City,” a new kind of Christian community embracing both poor and non-poor members.

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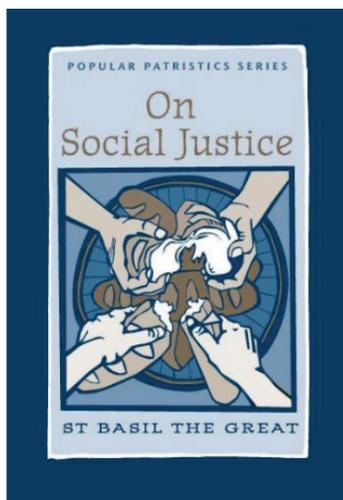
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drought broke out in Caesarea, followed by a severe famine. In a series of homilies preached during this time, Basil urged those who had means to share material necessities with those in need. The thrust of Basil's message is this: *simplify your life, so you have something to share with others*. He became a vocal advocate for the creation of a new kind of community, one based on simplicity and sharing, rather than competition and private ownership. Just outside of Caesarea, Basil founded a philanthropic center where people could go to receive food, clothing, shelter and medical care free of charge. After Basil's death, his friend Gregory of Nazianzus renamed the center the "New City."

Basil's center was more than a new philanthropic institution; it was a new kind of community, a place of education and worship, a kind of "alternative society" with its own economy and polity, where people living in voluntary simplicity shared their gifts with the poor, who were also invited to share their gifts. The "New City" was a place where everyone had something to give as well as something to receive, and each one's gift was valued.

The vision of the "New City" is an evocative image that is not limited to a Christian context, however. It is also reflected in stories and images taken from many religious traditions, including the Jewish notion of "tikkun ha ir tikkun olam" ("repair of the city, repair of the world"), and the Muslim practice of the Hajj, which brings together people of every ethnicity, social background and language as one community. Against this background, the New City Initiative set out to answer this question: "What does the New City look like in a modern context, and how can such an ancient model of a new kind of community unleash the energy and creative imagination of congregations towards the goal of ending homelessness?"



Basil of Caesarea's homilies on social justice issues are collected in *St. Basil the Great: On Social Justice*, translated by C. Paul Schroeder and published by SVS Press.

Start of the project: orientation, curriculum and urban immersion

In order to facilitate the goal of helping people in congregations envision and create new communities, a curriculum entitled "Building the New City" was developed. The curriculum took the form of a six-week study structured around six "communal practices"—*compassionate seeing, heartfelt listening, intentional welcoming, joyful sharing, grateful receiving and cooperative building*—that reflect Basil of Caesarea's vision of the "New City" as a new community embracing both poor and non-poor members.

Each week's study materials included texts from Basil of Caesarea for reflection and meditation, specific practices for participants to engage in throughout the week, prayers and scriptural readings, stories of people who have experienced homelessness taken from a series of interviews conducted as part of the project, facts

about homelessness, discussion questions and opportunities to make specific commitments as a group.

On April 24, 2010, the New City Initiative held an orientation for faith communities interested in participating in the Initiative, which was attended by approximately 75 people representing 15 congregations. The orientation sought to bring together scholarly and practical approaches to matters of poverty and homelessness. Speakers included Dr. Susan Holman, a Harvard scholar specializing in public health and the history of Christian philanthropy and the author of *God Knows There's Need: Christian Responses to Poverty*; Lio Alaalatoa, an outreach worker at JOIN who has been working with homeless people for over 15 years; and Paul Schroeder, the coordinator of the Initiative and author and translator of *On Social Justice: St. Basil the Great*.

The chefs of CUSINA prepared a delicious lunch; CUSINA is a cooking class for formerly homeless people jointly organized by JOIN and Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Cathedral that also served as the pilot project for the New City Initiative. Afterward, a panel of formerly homeless men and women spoke about how congregations might build supportive community with people who have experienced homelessness. At the conclusion of the orientation, the *Initiative's Building the New City* curriculum was unveiled and distributed.

Continuing the momentum of the curriculum launch, the Initiative organized an "Urban Immersion" experience for representatives of faith communities on May 22, 2010. The urban immersion offered an introduction to the realities of life on the streets of Portland, focusing on the realities of life for people sleeping outside, in shelters or in SROs (single room occupancy apartments, often no more than 100 square feet) in the Old Town/Chinatown area of Portland.

The immersion was hosted by the Downtown Chapel Roman Catholic Parish, and included a reflection by Fr. Ron Raab of the Downtown Chapel, a guided walking tour of downtown, and a scavenger hunt during which participants were challenged to find the answer to various questions about life on the streets by talking to people they met downtown, as well as to find lunch for \$1.22. There were 22 people representing ten congregations who participated in the Urban Immersion.

Emergence and development of new communities

Upon completion of the curriculum, congregations were guided through a visioning process in order to develop their own version of the "New City," a new community structured around the six communal practices. Congregations were encouraged to use creativity in this process, not limiting themselves to "service" models (feeding, clothing, sheltering), but focusing rather on community and relationship-building. As an aspect of this process, congregations sought to discern their "genius"—something the community does very well and takes pride in—and to find ways of using that genius as the basis for forming these new communities.

The following are some examples of how congregations have sought to develop these new communities.

Find the "New City Initiative" on Facebook
www.facebook.com/NewCityInitiative



Photo credit: JOIN

Jeannie, a participant in the "Just Glass" program at Grace Memorial Episcopal Church, displays her glass art project.

Parkrose United Methodist Church

Parkrose had been actively seeking a deeper connection to the surrounding community, especially those affected by poverty and hunger. The "Building the New City" curriculum and the connection to JOIN that came with it helped the community to take fresh steps towards this goal.

The "puppet dinner theater" project at Parkrose United Methodist Church began as a project with a dual focus on food and storytelling. The congregation already had a "library" of over 50 puppets from a previous "puppet ministry" that had lain largely unused in the basement for many years. Formerly homeless people were offered the opportunity to tell their story using puppets as a medium. Kids on the Block, a non-profit puppetry troupe working in public schools, offered training and support to the fledgling puppeteers.

At the same time, Parkrose developed a community dinner welcoming members of the congregation and people from the neighborhood, at which the puppet shows were performed. The congregation also began a food pantry that served people from JOIN and others from the neighborhood who participated in the dinner.

As time went on, participants have found additional ways of sharing their gifts, including music and storytelling. Through these experiences, members at Parkrose have forged many strong and lasting bonds with formerly homeless people.



Photo credit: JOIN

Charles, a participant in the "dinner theater" program at Parkrose United Methodist Church, shows off a puppet.

Grace Memorial Episcopal Church

Grace Memorial is a congregation with a passion for art: there is an art studio on their campus, and every year the congregation hosts an art camp for youth. The “Just Glass” project at Grace Memorial brought together congregants and formerly homeless people to learn how to make fused glass art. Participants in the class, comprised of members from Grace and formerly homeless people from JOIN, met over several sessions to learn how to cut and assemble glass pieces into art and jewelry.

The creation of glass art became a kind of metaphor for the New City, fusing together what had formerly been separate, and bringing beauty and grace out of broken fragments. The final project was a large multi-piece wall hanging that was created jointly by all the members of the class; this piece is intended to hang alternately at Grace Memorial and at JOIN.

Perhaps one of the most moving moments in the class took place after the daughter of one of the participants was tragically killed; the students worked together to produce a beautiful glass art memorial honoring the woman’s daughter. The memorial was presented to the mother by members of the class in a small ceremony at JOIN.

First Christian Church

First Christian is located in the Portland downtown core, where the reality of homelessness is often especially visible. The congregation already had an active “prayer shawl” ministry, knitting shawls for people from the congregation who were sick or in need of prayer; these prayer shawls represent the love and prayerful concern of the entire community for the sick member.



Photo credit: JOIN

Participants in the “knitting circle” at First Christian Church share projects and ideas.

After completing the curriculum, a group of women from First Christian decided to create a “knitting circle.” In partnership with Housing Transitions, an arm of Catholic Charities, they began knitting together with women who have experienced homelessness. Knitting is a natural community-building exercise, as it provides ample opportunity for conversation. Over the course of several months, participants of all skill levels came together to share their projects, offering advice, ideas and camaraderie. The knitting became an image of the goal of the project: to knit together a new kind of community.

At present the knitting circle is pursuing a new mission: working together to knit hats for infants experiencing “shaken baby syndrome.”

Moreland Presbyterian Church

Moreland Presbyterian is located in the Westmoreland neighborhood of Portland. Members of the congregation were already seeking new ways of connecting with people from their neighborhood at risk of poverty and homelessness. After completing the curriculum, a core group from the congregation, drawing upon their fun-loving nature and taking advantage of their location near Westmoreland Park, created



Photo credit: JOIN

“Welcome home” party for Dave, formerly homeless man, sponsored by Moreland Presbyterian Church.

a series of events structured around a theme that might be called “holy play.”

In the summer of 2010, Moreland hosted several outings bringing together people who have experienced homelessness and members of the congregation to play outdoor games, including kickball, and share a barbecue. After the weather turned cold and rainy, the congregation brought the activities indoors with a series of events offering table games and group activities. Participants shared conversation, laughter and stories at these events.

Members of the congregation have also remained connected to participants between events by writing cards and making phone calls. In April of 2011, the congregation hosted a housewarming party for Dave, a participant in the events who had been homeless for 11 years after he was housed by JOIN.

Members of the congregation are continuing their efforts to strengthen the relationships that have been formed, develop new relationships, and integrate the New City project more deeply into the life of the community.

CUSINA

In 2007, CUSINA began as a joint project of Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Cathedral and JOIN. CUSINA (an acronym for “Culinary Utensils, Skills, Information and Nutrition Alliance”) brought together members of the Holy Trinity congregation and formerly homeless people to cook Greek food together. More than just a cooking class, CUSINA became a cooking community, a place where people shared their gifts by creating and enjoying delicious and nutritious food together.

Relationships between Holy Trinity members and formerly homeless participants often spilled over into other areas as people discovered common interests and found additional ways of sharing in each others’ lives. Each year, at the conclusion of the class, graduates of the program prepare the food for JOIN’s annual “community



Photo credit: JOIN

Shelly, a CUSINA graduate, shows off sushi she prepared for the JOIN Community Celebration.

celebration. This year’s celebratory event took place at First Christian Church in downtown Portland, one of the congregations participating in the New City Initiative.

CUSINA served as the original pilot project for the New City Initiative, as an innovative example of how a congregation can share its genius and create a supportive community for people transitioning out of homelessness. CUSINA also provided the platform for the Path to Work Partnership, an innovative employment training and placement program, which brought together JOIN and the CUSINA program, DePaul Industries (which offers employment training for disabled and disadvantaged workers), and the Old Spaghetti Factory. As a result of this partnership, five graduates of the CUSINA program were hired to work in the restaurant industry in 2011, and an expansion of the program is currently under development.

St. David of Wales Episcopal Church

St. David of Wales is home to a diverse congregation of people with a wide variety of interests. In addition to innovative worship projects, the congregation has developed its own music studio, the Harrison Hill Music Studio, and its own yoga program.



Photo credit: JOIN

Mike, participant in the “music circle” at St. David of Wales Church, plays slide guitar with a coffee mug.

In response to the New City Initiative project, and in keeping with the congregation’s expansive nature, St. David’s developed several unique opportunities for people who have experienced homelessness. Beginning in 2010, some members of the St. David’s community began meeting regularly at JOIN’s drop-in center to share activities such as knitting and crocheting with people who have experienced homelessness.

In the spring of 2011, the congregation started a “music circle,” a cooperative music learning environment for people who have experienced homelessness and people from the local neighborhood. These music circles brought together people of all skill levels. Instruments and instruction were provided through a grant from Southeast Uplift. One participant in the music circles referred to the classes as “music therapy,” the one place in his life where he felt he could really shine.

The congregation also began a “movement and breathing” community, bringing together congregants and people who have experienced homelessness to practice yoga and Qigong; this project was also opened to people from the HIV Day Center operated by EMO. These classes were especially tailored to suit the needs of people who have experienced homelessness, many of whom have physical disabilities, mobility limitations and/or significant pain issues.

Members of the congregation have also started a monthly book club, meeting with people who have experienced homelessness to share what they are reading as well as what has been happening in each others’ lives.

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Key findings and areas of further study

We learned a great deal during the first year of the New City Initiative. Some of what we've learned we are using to make the project even better as we look toward the future. Here is a summary of some of the major findings of the first year, as well as some areas where more research is needed:

1. *Congregations have considerable resources that, when unleashed, can be brought to bear in the task of ending homelessness.*

Since the beginning of the New City Initiative, small groups in 15 congregations (approximately 150 individuals) have completed the "Building the New City" curriculum. Twelve of these congregations have gone on to develop community-building projects, bringing together congregants and people who have experienced homelessness; to date, over 100 volunteers have been engaged in this process. As reflected in the stories on the previous pages, one key finding of the project is that considerable creative energy is often unleashed when congregations are invited to bring their "genius" to bear on the task of ending homelessness.

The teachings of Basil of Caesarea and the model of the "New City" also proved to be evocative for participants. In a survey of people who participated in the curriculum process, the vast majority of respondents (88.2 percent) found the texts from St. Basil helpful in their reflections on creating community with people who have experienced homelessness; 58.8 percent said the texts were "very helpful" in this process. This supports the initial hypothesis that ancient models can inform contemporary efforts of congregations to engage the issue of homelessness.

2. *Community engagement may be a measurable indicator of housing success.*

In its first year, the New City Initiative engaged 107 people who had experienced homelessness in events and activities developed by congregations. During the period of their engagement and following (average six to nine months), our analysis showed:

- An overall positive housing outcome rate of 89.5 percent (positive housing outcomes measure those who remained in housing and those who were homeless and became housed, against those who were housed and became homeless and those who remained homeless).
- A housing retention rate of 93.2 percent (housing retention rates measure those who were housed and remained in housing against those who were housed and became homeless again).

These figures, which compare quite positively to local and national averages, suggest an intriguing possibility: that community engagement may be a measurable indicator of housing success. Anecdotal evidence from cases at JOIN suggests that homeless and formerly homeless people who regularly engage in community activities experience less depression and show an increased capacity to network, build relationships of trust and take advantage of available resources, which may in turn enhance their ability to restabilize in housing.

One formerly homeless person who participated in the CUSINA cooking classes put it this way: "During the week, I just sit at home and get very bored and depressed. This class gives me something to look forward to during the week. ... I am very happy now!"



Photo credit: JOIN

In July 2011, Portland Mennonite Church organized the first "hiking club" with people who have experienced homelessness. The hiking club is among the newest projects facilitated through the New City Initiative.

Although more research is needed in this area, the data would appear to support the hypothesis that a key to ending homelessness is the reestablishment of relationships and community, and that congregations can make a significant contribution to ending homelessness by creating supportive communities for people who have experienced homelessness.

3. *A paradigm shift towards a focus on healing trauma is needed.*

One of the most significant findings of the New City Initiative project was also the most surprising: it proved far more difficult than expected to engage formerly homeless people in community-building projects designed by congregations.

This was the case despite the fact that formerly homeless people often self-reported as desiring more opportunities for social engagement, and even expressed the desire to participate in one or more community-building opportunities arranged by churches. But a predictable pattern emerged: as the date of the event grew closer, people became noncommittal about their participation, eventually finding some reason or another not to participate, but promising that they would do so the next time.

One significant factor that seems to affect the ability of people who have experienced homelessness to engage in community and relationships is trauma. Trauma is significantly linked to the experience of homelessness; one of the largest studies on this subject¹, surveying 600 homeless men and 300 homeless women, found that over half of homeless men and women have experienced a significant traumatic event outside the range of normal experience (rape, combat, assault, witnessing a person severely injured or killed, accident or sudden injury, or other traumatic event), and that one-fifth of homeless men and one-third of homeless women have symptoms consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

People who have experienced trauma frequently report symptoms such as depression, low energy and a general sense that their menu of choices in life has diminished. One formerly homeless woman, who was robbed at gunpoint while working at a restaurant and subsequently became homeless, described her experience of trauma in this way: "I just shut down. ... I pretty much [makes a whistling sound] disappeared."

In view of this finding, congregations may find it helpful to reframe their language and thinking around homelessness from a paradigm of providing services to people in need to one that emphasizes healing trauma through supportive relationships. Although developing relationships of trust with people who have experienced trauma often takes considerable time and patience, it may

prove the most fruitful avenue for engendering lasting change.

Basil's New City is often described as a kind of hospital, a place where people could go to seek healing for their physical and psychic wounds. Congregations can continue this legacy by seeking to become communities of mutual vulnerability and support, where people can feel comfortable sharing not only their gifts, but also their wounds, while also sharing in the process of each other's healing.

Ways to connect with the New City Initiative

- **Curriculum:** The New City Initiative curriculum is available for use by congregations. A new interfaith version of the curriculum with Jewish, Christian and Muslim scriptural texts is scheduled for release in the fall. The Initiative will be providing support for study groups beginning October 2011.
- **Urban Immersion:** The next New City Initiative urban immersion is scheduled for Oct. 29, 2011, in downtown Portland.

For more information about these and other opportunities available through the New City Initiative, contact Paul Schroeder at newcityinitiative@gmail.com, or (503) 913-7853.

Future of the New City Initiative

The New City Initiative is continuing to experiment with new and innovative forms of community between members of congregations and people who have experienced homelessness. In June 2011, the Collins Foundation announced that it would be funding a three-year grant providing partial funding to continue the work of the New City Initiative.

At present, an exploratory committee has been assembled to explore the possibility that the Initiative would branch out from JOIN and form its own nonprofit entity with a mission to engage faith communities in ending homelessness.

¹ Carol S. North, MD, and Elizabeth M. Smith, PhD, "Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Among Homeless Men and Women," *Hospital and Community Psychiatry*, October 1992 Volume 43 Number 10, pp. 1010-1016.

All photos courtesy of JOIN.

Written by Paul Schroeder

Coordinator of Faith-Based Resources at JOIN, creator of the New City Initiative project, translator of *St. Basil the Great: On Social Justice*, and the author of *Building the New City: A Curriculum on Homelessness for Congregations*.

