

Coming In From The Cold
Part III - The Community Meal

The Greater Framingham Community Church
Noon, December 15th, 2016

It is the faces of our luncheon guests that I study while welcoming them, thanking them for coming to this church basement to share food and fellowship, and shaking their hands.

Today about 125 guests have chosen to join us. Most live in our supportive housing network in this community, the establishment of which is now approaching its 30th anniversary. A few are holdouts, choosing to sleep rough, yet frequenting the Drop-In Center and coming here today for a hot meal and the gift of a "hoodie."

The signs of bodies aging faster than life experience usually demands are unremarkable, but in full view today, often reflected in the faces of the folks who crowd this basement space: bloodshot eyes, sometimes yellowish, often glazed, facial skin deeply creased above the eyes, often pockmarked, pitted or lined with purple capillaries playing across the cheeks; teeth either missing, yellowish or blackened; and gaits reflecting hip, knee or balance issues. It would remind a Christian of the Vale of Tears. Depressing? Maybe on one level, not on another. Our guests are survivors, here, in the present, to share a midday meal and some fellowship. Many have spent years enduring stints in systems of care, pinballing between what are often euphemistically called care systems, and not-so-euphemistically called correctional systems.

The Rev. Dr. J. Anthony Lloyd gives the grace. I look across the room while he speaks of faith, community and the welcoming of others. My thoughts focus on the Buddha's First Noble Truth. Then I wonder if Rev. Lloyd realizes how important his presence and the location and presence of his church are to this community.

A man given to wearing wildly colorful sweaters, I will not miss the opportunity to tell him that I need to wear my sunglasses while speaking with him.

Shalom.

In 1986, we acquired 73 Hollis Street, a dilapidated and disrespectful lodging house. Today, the building is still tired, yet the energy it contains, directed toward helping previously homeless people achieve self-sufficiency, is not. Right after that, we acquired 14-16 Gordon Street, another unlicensed and disrespectful lodging house with a vacant cinder-block building in the rear. Today, that vacant cinder-block building houses our YARCM Program, and the front building looks great. While I muse, Eddie Cannon stops by to chat, lamenting his unsuccessful efforts to get the Safe Haven program participants over to the meal - a three block van ride. The Vets who live at Safe Haven are perhaps the most challenging residents in our continuum of care. He snaps out of it pretty quickly. "Jim, as my wife and I were driving through downtown Framingham the other day, and I started to wave and say hi to the people clustered in front of the Salvation Army, she asked me if I knew every homeless person in the Town. We both smiled and I said, 'Honey, this is what I was meant to do.'"

"Eddie, you're the best."

As - Salam - u - Alaikum.

As our housing continuum in Framingham grew, we acquired 10-12 Pine Street, a dilapidated vacant former lodging house, and turned it into safe, affordable housing. We converted 40 Evergreen Street from a doctor's office to a 17-room supported housing residence. We opened Maggie's Place on the second floor of our old Detox Center, and we worked with the United Church of Christ to create Scudder House in a vacant, unused building on the grounds of their Center on Badger Road.

As I continue gazing across the room, smiling at folks and thanking them for attending, Hope brings Cheryl by to introduce her to me.

May peace be with you.

It is one task to bring folks in from the cold. It is another to keep them there. I used to believe that getting people housed was sufficient for most of the folks who came to our front door. Now I no longer believe that. A lot of the folks who live with us need a mentor, a guide, a friend to help them stay and remain housed. As Beth Connolly said to me recently, "It's amazing what a CSPECH Case Manager can accomplish in the lives of frail and challenging residents and program participants."

As I watched Darlene lead a whole group of guests and staff she had assembled in front of the piano belt out a raucous version of "Jingle Bells," I thought;

"We are all in this together."