



## **Live Strong: Homeless African American Men and the Church**

**by Charles Cotton**

*Charles Cotton is a Young Adult Liturgist for The African American Lectionary and the Minister of Music for Olivet Institutional Church in Cleveland, Ohio.*

Last quarter the Young Adult Liturgists' of the Lectionary began using the subject "Live Strong" as they addressed a variety of needs of the African American community. This brief article focuses on ways to help homeless African American men.

In major metropolitan cities in the United States the homeless rate is ever increasing and the funding to provide resources for the homeless are decreasing. In most metropolitan cities there are blocks of churches that welcome worshipers on Sunday morning but close their doors during the week. As the problem of homelessness explodes, churches are needed to stand in the financial gap more than ever. In its 2011 survey of 25 cities, the U.S. Conference of Mayors found that the sheltered homeless population is estimated to be 42 percent African American. Among African American males, the homeless rate is even more alarming.

There are four questions that African American homeless men are likely asking:

1. How long is this going to last?
2. What did I do to get myself into this situation?
3. How do I move on from this season?
4. Will anyone help me?

The answers to some of these questions should be provided by the Black Church. The Church needs to provide mental, emotional, financial, and spiritual support.

Below are interviews of "Willie" and "Frank," two African American males who were homeless. Willie was homeless for a little less than six months. Frank was homeless for a year. Each story is filled with insights and teaching moments for the Black Church relative to what it can do to assist the homeless.

[Interview with "Willie"](#) (Click Here)

[Interview with "Frank"](#) (Click Here)

Olivet Institutional Baptist Church (below) in Cleveland, Ohio, is one of several churches providing a model for outreach and support to African American homeless men.



Above is a picture from the homeless shelter's Thanksgiving dinner provided by four black-owned restaurants in Cleveland. These entrepreneurs show that the business community also has a role in helping the homeless. Olivet Institutional Church joined with the business owners to feed the homeless. The story below was featured in the *Plain Dealer* Newspaper.

By Diane Suchetka

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Dinner included collard greens, sweet potatoes, black-eyed peas, corn muffins and peach cobbler for dessert.

"Nothing came from a can," said Debbie McHamm, spokeswoman for the four black-owned restaurants that came together this Thanksgiving to serve dinner to nearly 500 men at the 2100 Lakeside Ave. homeless shelter and deliver 100 meals to others across the community.

The Cleveland and Shaker Heights restaurants provided the dinner with help from Olivet Institutional Baptist Church on Quincy Avenue, which lined up 250 volunteers to greet, serve, deliver, and clean up during and after the event.

"If I can come here and just give one person a little bit of hope, then I've done my job," said volunteer Kim McClamy, "Everybody should give back. We all have homes. We all have jobs. We're truly blessed." Giving back and outreach is one key component of the Olivet Institutional Baptist Church.

Zanzibar Soul Fusion executive chef Tony Fortner, who also cooks for Angie's Soul Cafe, prepared most of the food for the Thanksgiving Dinner.

## **II. Ways to Begin Serving Homeless African American Men**

As Willie and Frank stated in their interviews, providing transactional resources is not the only way faith communities can help the homeless community.

Consider the following ideas to begin service to African American homeless men.

- *Build a relationship with the men in your congregation that will end their fear of being rejected and judged and allows them to maintain their pride.* Churches must be intentional about building healthy relationships with men that create an environment of open communication and authentic outreach. Fear of being rejected and judged prevents men from being transparent and relational with other men, especially church leaders. Those who are homeless are carrying enough guilt, shame, and embarrassment about so many things; they need unconditional acceptance. We must build relationships that will encourage, empower, and engage men and meet their needs.
- *Provide life-skills training and professional training that will assist men in finding housing, employment, and other resources that will sustain them.* The homeless are not solely in need of finances; even more than this, many need skills that will help change their current reality and propel them to a better life. Most men are not quick to vocalize their immediate needs, but the needs are clear. Providing resources that will sustain men long-term is the best way to aid them. The Samaritan man in Luke 10:33-34 elucidates what it means to help in a way that offers long-term sustainability: “But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him” (ESV). The church must show compassion and provide resources that help sustain men, such as Internet access to seek employment, computer labs for résumé writing, transportation to employment interviews, clothing and toiletries to prepare for employment, advocacy of city agencies to obtain assistance for homeless men who need mental health and medical assistance, etc.
- *Mix all outreach opportunities with long-term-assistance vehicles.* During the holidays, provide a meal for homeless men. After the dinner, provide food vouchers or other food resources that will benefit the recipients long-term. Also, provide men with information on other resources that are available that are not provided by your church. Feeding homeless men a meal one or two nights each year is not enough. More than 26,000 people in America are homeless each night. They need long-term assistance that is a hand up, not a handout.

### **III. Resources You Can Use**

National and community organizations that can assist you in helping the homeless:

National Alliance to End Homelessness

<http://www.endhomelessness.org>

202-638-1526

National Coalition for the Homeless Resources Page

<http://www.nationalhomeless.org/resources/index.html>

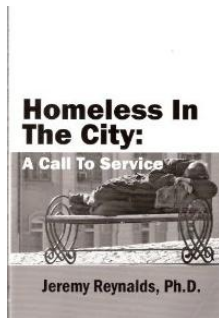
US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Homes and Communities department

<http://www.hud.gov/homeless/index.cfm>

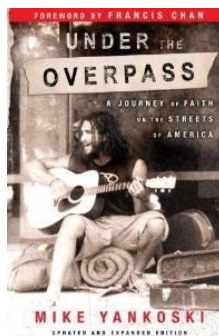
HUD Homelessness Resource and Exchange

<http://www.hudhre.info/index.cfm?do=viewAbout>

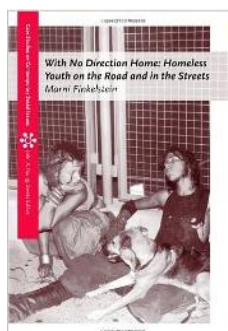
## Books



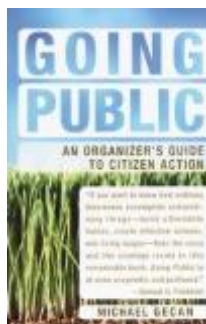
Reynolds, Jeremy. *Homeless in the City: A Call to Service*. Theatron Books, 2007.



Yankoski, Mike. *Under the Overpass: A Journey of Faith on the Streets of America*. Multnomah Books, 2005.



Finkelstein, Marni. *With No Direction Home: Homeless Youth on the Road and in the Streets*. Wadsworth Publishing, 2004.



Gecan, Michael. *Going Public: An Organizer's Guide to Citizen Action*. Anchor, 2004.

## **Conclusion**

The Church will not be the Church until our actions are reflected and celebrated within the homeless communities of our country. It is our responsibility to provide hope for the hopeless, love to all, and mercy to those who stand in need. We must be about outreach and missions outside the four walls of our church. We must birth anew meaningful services and outreach to the poor. In the words of Robert Frost, “The woods are lovely, dark, and deep, But we have promises to keep, And miles to go before we sleep, And miles to go before we sleep.”